

Handwriting Today... and A Stolen American Relic

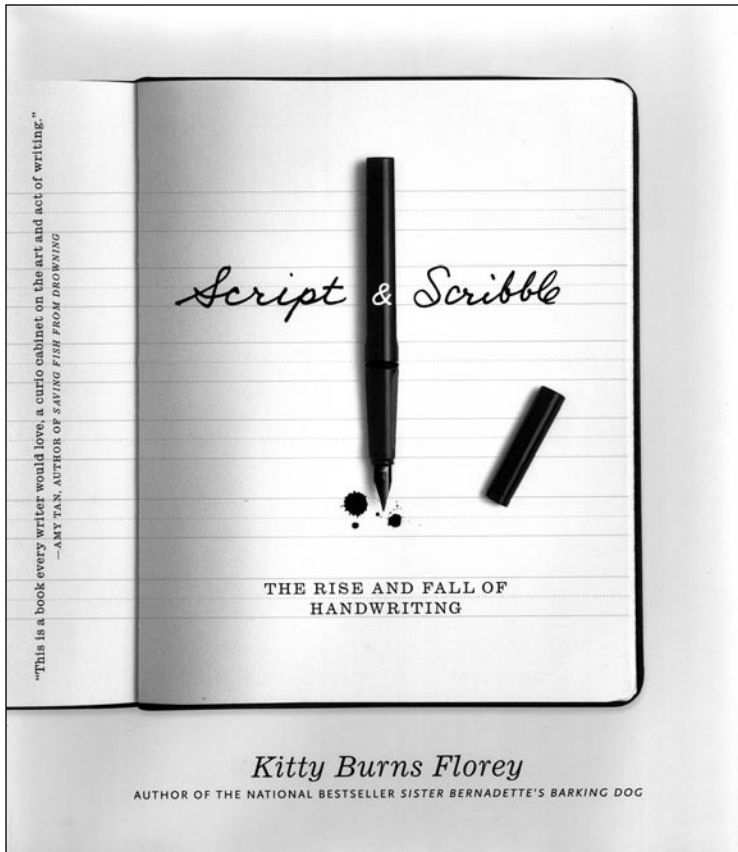
WILLIAM BUTTS

FLOREY, Kitty Burns. *Script and Scribble: The Rise and Fall of Handwriting.* Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2009. 8vo. Hardbound, dust jacket. 190pp. Illustrations. **\$22.95.**

HOWARD, David. *Lost Rights: The Misadventures of a Stolen American Relic.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. 344pp. **\$26.00.**

If you're anything like me, handling handwriting from many eras on a daily basis, you get sick and tired of the endless refrain from the general public when viewing old documents: "*People all had such beautiful handwriting back then!*" or, conversely, "*No one writes like that today!*" Et cetera—ad nauseum.

I've almost given up refuting these gross generalizations, but "in the old days" I'd pull out letters from, say, Horace Greeley, the Duke of Wellington, a Civil War soldier and other notoriously illegible scribblers to prove that every age has its share of beautiful penmanship, horrid penmanship and mediocre penmanship. And as for modern penmanship, most of the examples of current penmanship I see are in the form of personal checks



(thankfully), and there too I find a mix of beautiful, horrid and mediocre penmanship. The more things change, the more they you-know-what.

Which is one beef I have with Kitty Burns Florey in her otherwise enjoyable *Script and Scribble: The Rise and Fall of Handwriting*. Other than the uninitiated general public cited above, the other group that unfairly bemoans current penmanship are the handwriting snobs (which I don't consider Florey)—elitists whose devotion to pseudo-Palmerian calligraphy or other esoteric specialties blinds them to the simple, honest, unsophisticated attractiveness of the day-to-day script of ordinary persons who've never studied calligraphy. "Nearly everyone writes badly,"

rants Florey: “dentists, nurses, poets, psychiatrists, hairdressers, zookeepers, chemists, schoolteachers, electricians. You name it. When we put pen to paper, most of us... squeeze out hideous and barely legible scribbles, and the handwriting even of some Palmer Methodists has deteriorated with age, lack of use, endless keyboarding, and the rigors of multitasking.”

I do recognize a vague kernel of truth behind this attitude—handwriting is generally *not* taught well in today’s schools—yet I also find “dentists, nurses, poets, psychiatrists, hairdressers, zookeepers, chemists, schoolteachers, electricians” galore of a century and more ago whose handwriting can only be described as hideous. It is possible to criticize modern penmanship standards without falling into the trap of cheap blanket condemnations.

Script and Scribble is a fun and thoughtful diversion from the more sober fare often addressed in this column—books about forgeries, frauds and other unsavory autograph issues. Those of us infatuated with handwriting and the handwritten word will recognize a kindred spirit from Florey’s first words:

Since I first picked up a pen, I have been under the spell of handwriting. I’ve experimented endlessly with different scripts: straight up, right-slanting, left-slanting, print-like, florid, spare, minimalist, maximalist, round, spiky, highly legible, insouciantly scrawled. I can’t make a list or write a check without scrutinizing my rushed, ugly F’s and illegible r’s and wishing I’d taken more time or had a better artistic sense....

Florey’s “A Handwritten Life” preface to *Script and Scribble*—ruminations on her own handwriting history—is a delightful, often hilarious romp through the author’s personal relationship with handwriting. From her own Old School penmanship training at St. John the Baptist Academy in Syracuse, New York, where Sister Victorine taught her the Palmer Method, Florey tracks her progression from pencil to straight pen to fountain pen and finally the controversial ballpoint pen, all the while flirting with different handwriting styles. “I used to change my handwriting the way I changed my hair color,” she muses.

It’s obvious now that most of my scriptorial attempts were outrageously pretentious, appallingly twee, but I considered each

one of the height of cool—the proper handwriting for an aspiring Bohemian, a future writer, a deeply sensitive person who wrote deeply sensitive poetry and burned it in the sink, weeping. Just as nineteenth-century ink nuts—a common species in those days—believed that good penmanship would lead directly to good moral character, I think I must have believed that an arty style would make me an artist.

The real meat of *Script and Scribble*, though—the *Rise* referred to in the book's subtitle—are the lengthy chapters “Pen, Paper, Ink—A Stroll Through Handwriting History” and “The Golden Age of Penmanship.” The former I wouldn't call a stroll, but rather a power-walk, a crash course through two millenium of handwriting history from the Sumerians through the 19th century. Florey takes the reader through the Phoenicians, their writing tools and the alphabet they developed, the scripts that evolved under the Romans (the Square Capital, Roman Rustic, Uncial and Half-Uncial), the early monks with their Insular Majuscule and Insular Minuscule, the Middle Ages and its Carolingian Minuscule and Gothic script, the rise of Italic with the Renaissance, its simplification into Copperplate or Roundhand.... Florey doesn't neglect writing implements either, moving deftly through the evolution of the quill pen, the switch to metal pens and shift to fountain pens and the ballpoint revolution—and let's not forget the role of pencils. A pleasant refresher this, and to anyone for whom this isn't a refresher but an introduction I can't think of a more enticing way to get hooked on this seductive topic. “The Golden Age of Penmanship” gives the reader a sound overview of the Spencer script that dominated the 19th century and the Palmer method that supplanted it in the 20th century, closing with some entertaining digressions on the role of gender and handedness in handwriting.

Florey has a pleasant light touch that nicely livens up what could be mundane reading in less adept hands. Did you know, for instance, that “Scholars estimate that perhaps 15 percent of Romans were literate” and that “books were fairly inexpensive in Ancient Rome: you could pick up a copy of Martial's *Epigrams* for six sesterces. (As a comparison, Cleopatra's pearls were worth 40 million sesterces.)” Too bad she couldn't get those same scholars to give a more down-to-earth conversion comparison for

those six sesterces! Did you know that in the 19th century, “For a while, some wealthy men affected illegible handwriting to show that they were too important and leisured to bother with such piddling concerns”? Or that “A typical pencil can draw a line thirty-five miles long” or that “pencil makers claim you could eat a pencil a day and not get sick”? These may seem trivia-like out of context like this, but such data brings this condensed handwriting history to life.

About “Father Michon and My Aunt Fanny,” a chapter on graphology (analyzing personality through handwriting), this reviewer has mixed feelings. Having gone through a brief period of interest in the subject as a juvenile and absorbed a few books on its methods, I long ago joined the camp firmly convinced that letter formation is largely a meaningless motor function as relevant to personality analysis as the shape of your ears or length of your hand span. But *Script and Scribble* is very much a personal and idiosyncratic book, so what interests Florey is germane. And whether you’re a believer or not, she provides a concise, interesting history of graphology’s history from Camillo Baldi’s 1625 *A Method to Recognize the Nature and Quality of a Writer from His Letters* through Abbe Hyppolyte Michon in late 19th century France and other European and American advocates, culminating in the P.T. Barnum of graphology: Milton N. Bunker (with the emphasis on *bunk*), who Florey labels a “grapho-opportunist.” She rightly notes graphology’s general acceptance in Europe (where it’s approached more “scientifically”) and discredit in America.

Handwriting’s *Fall* as cited in *Script and Scribble*’s subtitle is the subject of “Writing by Hand in a Digital Age,” in which Florey ponders what will become of handwriting as it’s used less and less. Though Florey nowhere suggests she’s an autograph collector, it’s clear she appreciates the romantic attraction of author manuscripts. “...I find it difficult to describe the exact nature of the excitement I feel when I encounter a favorite writer’s signature—the real, immediate, spontaneous thing, done with a hand and a pen—or better yet, the original manuscript of some work I love....” And a bit further along: “...a writer’s script, with its smears, crossings out, second thoughts, and marginal notes, seems to take the viewer directly into his or her mind.... When you see the manuscript of a work that’s important to you, it’s difficult not to be very aware of that hand holding the pen and

forming the letters—and to feel a bit closer to the mind behind it all.”

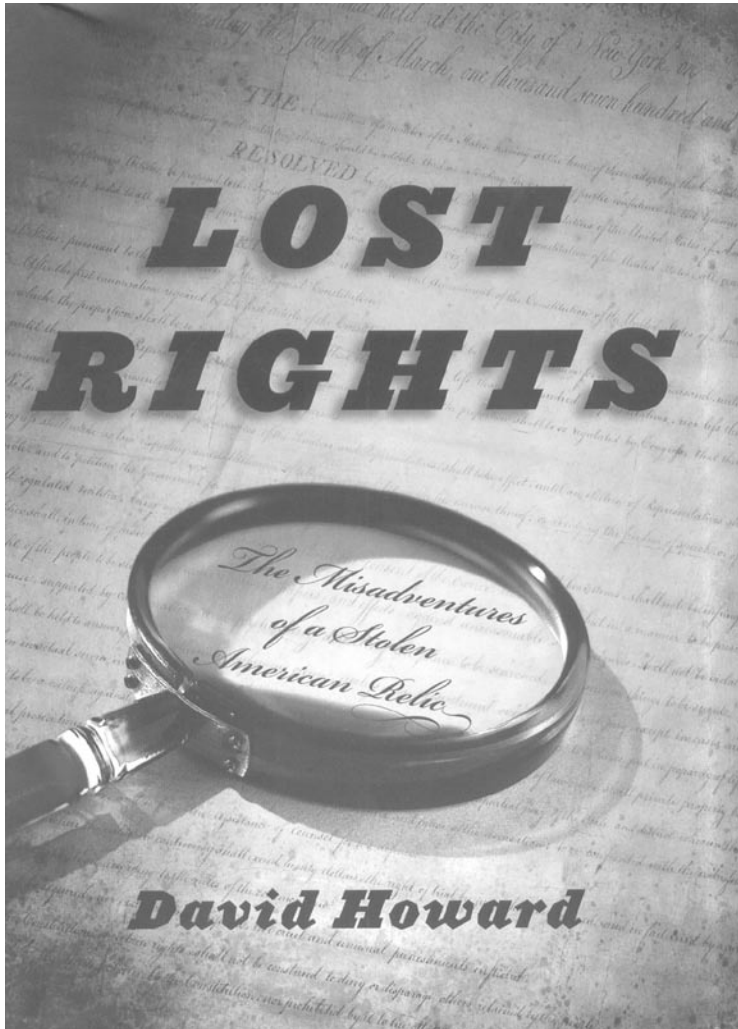
But has handwriting, as Florey believes, fallen? Are we in the midst of “the sorry situation... when it’s seen as a useless archaic skill, a fading flower kept precariously in bloom”? Handwriting’s role has certainly *changed*, and the proper teaching of it has been in decline for years, but just as the automobile spelled the death of the locomotive (wrong), television the death of radio (wrong), Velcro the death of zippers (wrong) and the PC the death of the printed book (wrong—I think!), so too the internet revolution may simply spell an *adjustment* of handwriting’s role in our society. The PC was supposed to put the final nail in the book’s coffin—yet in recent years more printed books are being published than ever before. Computers were also supposed to result in paperless offices and the use of less paper—yet in recent years the typical computer-filled office is using far more paper than ever before.

No, I believe Florey overstates her case if she thinks handwriting will ever become obsolete. Her musings on our culture’s technical obsessions are certainly provocative and fall on receptive ears amongst us autograph collectors. But I predict that handwriting, like the printed book, will hold its own and limp along despite technological advances in communications. It will modify and adapt as it always has, not wither and die.

Florey’s *Script and Scribble* is a worthwhile look at handwriting’s past, present and possible future. It’s a physically attractive volume, too, and well illustrated—though inexplicably lacking an index, which is odd for a nonfiction title. There are some sloppy glitches early on (footnotes whose numbers don’t match the numbers in the text, among other annoyances that should’ve been caught), but overall this handsome production will strike a chord with any reader who cares for handwriting and wonders about its future.

The Bill of Rights

As one of those unfortunates to whom the Library of Congress for some reason refers people who phone claiming to have found unknown original copies of the Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights and Gettysburg Address, I’ve been shown



enough reproductions to wallpaper Independence Hall top to bottom, inside and out.

So it was with great excitement that I received David Howard's *Lost Rights: The Misadventures of a Stolen American Relic*. In 2003 a barrage of confusing and seemingly contradictory news reports

regarding a recovered Bill of Rights original copy flooded the media briefly. No matter how closely you followed the media circus surrounding the case, clearly there was far more behind the story than the onslaught of articles and sixty second t.v. sound bites could make sense of. The stolen Bill of Rights episode left many of us befuddled, wanting to know the full, unexpurgated, sordid tale.

Lost Rights has also been anticipated by anyone concerned with the growing issue of replevin—the legal principle by which a state has the right to lay claim to any document at any time deemed to have been unlawfully taken from its possession. That’s just part of the backdrop, though, for the 21st century’s first memorable instance of thievery and chicanery on a grand scale. You may recall the basic story as it unfolded on the news. North Carolina’s long-missing original copy of the Bill of Rights (there were 14 originals made, one for each state and one for the federal government) had been seized in an FBI sting operation in Philadelphia. Court battles ensued to determine who was the rightful owner of the priceless relic—values ranging from two million to forty million dollars were mentioned.

The full if convoluted tale has been deftly laid out by journalist Howard. He spins it well, if occasionally with an over-the-top *crime noire* touch. (Which, by the way, can sometimes lean toward the melodramatic. When his exciting introduction closes with a line about “how, in the quirky and colorful world of people who buy, sell, and study historical papers, nothing would ever be the same again,” I had to roll my eyes and say “*Huh?*” This and similar cases may have given those in our field an overdue note of circumspection, of greater awareness of the prospect of replevin—but *nothing would ever be the same again?* C’mon—too *Perils of Pauline* for me.)

Howard’s introduction sets the hook firmly, to be sure. From the opening scene when “three men and a woman crowded through the door and into the dimly lit lobby” of the obscure First Federal Congress Project in a government office building in Washington, DC to meet the scholarly authorities toiling there, Howard reels you in. “One of the men”—later described as “thuggish”—“laid a large cardboard art carton on the table.... Two of the men carefully lifted the flaps off the box and pulled out an ornate but chipped wooden frame. They laid the frame

on the table. Inside was a creased the faded document that looked very old. Charlene Bickford leaned close, stared for a few seconds, and felt the air leave her body.” In the awkward meeting that followed, the four declined to off their names, gave the impression they were armed and refused to divulge the slightest detail about the document.

Like any good storyteller, Howard doesn't tell a straightforward beginning to end story. He bobs and weaves artfully like a seasoned boxer, throwing in one story line here and another there, feinting occasionally to keep you on your toes, punching in a little sideline, dancing back to introduce background information such as, say, the practice of docketing the verso of documents and how it was done or the state of archival collections (practically nonexistent) in 19th century America. His style works well in unraveling and drawing out this complex story.

To make the very long history of this particular copy of the Bill of Rights very short, in April 1865 a Union soldier from Ohio was ransacking the secretary of state's office in the State House in Raleigh, North Carolina as federal forces took over the city. He swiped a large folded parchment as a souvenir—something about the 1789 amendments to the Constitution of the United States. Back home, a friend named Charles Shotwell bought it from him for five dollars. It remained with his family in Indiana for the next 130+ years, proudly framed and displayed, until his two aging granddaughters decided to sell it in the 1990s. In the 1890s the document had caused a brief minor flurry of interest when its existence was innocently mentioned in a newspaper article. North Carolina officials tried to pry it loose from Shotwell, but got nowhere. In the 1920s a family friend tried to sell it to North Carolina, but the attempt fizzled. By the 1990s, these events and the very existence of this Bill of Rights had been forgotten.

Lost Rights cast of characters is as brash and colorful as any Univision *telenovela*. Some are self-made men who worship their own creator. Foremost is legendary high-end New England antique dealer and *Antiques Roadshow* mainstay Wayne Pratt, “a hulking man, well over six feet tall, with a lineman's shoulders and barrel chest that rounded into a pronounced paunch.” Bigger than life, jovial, crafty, he becomes the moving force in buying the Bill of Rights for \$200,000—wearing down the Shotwell sisters from their original two million dollar asking price—and bringing in powerful, wealthy, well-connected colleagues to help

affect a sale. There's Pratt's best friend Bob Matthews, "A real estate developed in his early forties... fifteen years Pratt's junior and looked even younger... a bantam physique, a giant, toothy smile, and an edgy, high voltage comportment. Matthews spoke in gushing, roiling torrents of words. He couldn't sit still for more than two or three minutes at a time." Howard's profiles of this high-octane pair will stick with you. Pratt is by turn savvy, endearing, outrageous, hilarious and ultimately sad; Matthews transitions from obnoxious to— well, even more obnoxious, an unprincipled investor who you love to hate.

The secondary cast includes Peter Tillou, flamboyant New York art dealer, "small-boned and jug-eared in his sixties," enlisted by Pratt to help find the right buyer. There's Bill Reese, noted Connecticut rare book dealer enlisted by Tillou to authenticate the Bill of Rights: "...in his late forties, though he looked younger. He had thick glasses and a tumble of McCartney-esque hair that dangled haphazardly over large ears. His deep, resonant, basso profundo voice accentuated his fluid storytelling skills." The first knowledgeable manuscript dealer to examine the document, Reese (who was kept in the dark about the document's North Carolina background) was also the first to approach the provenance issue in an objective, methodical fashion. Reese is one of the few characters in a cast filled with murky characters involved in questionable dealings to emerge unscathed: Brilliant and accomplished bookseller, smart and ethical businessman, a credit to his profession. Also emerging squeaky clean are New York dealer Seth Kaller—"a kind of wonder boy in the manuscripts world. Youthful, round-faced, and soft-spoken, his hair combed straight back"—and the Manuscript Society's own past president and long-time *Manuscripts* auction columnist, Virginia dealer Ed Bomsey. Colleagues all, I'm pleased to say!

But these are just a few of *Lost Rights* revolving door of players. In New England and North Carolina, archivists, museum officials, lawyers, politicians and others crowd the picture as Pratt's people seek to market the Bill of Rights and create a plausible smokescreen to hide the document's North Carolina origin. The newly-formed National Constitution Center in Philadelphia becomes the prime candidate, though their understandable hesitancy due to provenance concerns stalls the proceedings.

Wayne Pratt's dreams of a multimillion dollar windfall dim as

more characters lay claim to a piece of the prize and potential deals fall through one by one. It's a fascinating trainwreck of a puzzle populated by wheeler-dealers and movers and shakers that Howard manages well. The machinations are dizzying by the time the FBI gets involved. Agent and art theft specialist Bob Wittman, one of the most intriguing characters in *Lost Rights*, sets up a sting operation at the National Constitution Center once North Carolina issues a seizure warrant for the Bill of Rights. "Wittman was a genteel, round-faced man in his late forties with silver-tinged dark hair," writes Howard. "He had a smooth, calming voice and a disarming sense of humor." And whoever said the feds have no sense of humor? Wittman provides one of the book's few humorous moments as the Bill of Rights was finally being returned home:

Before leaving, Wittman bought a small Bill of Rights reproduction at Independence Mall and put it on top of the protective sleeve containing the real parchment. When they landed in Raleigh, Wittman and Heine launched their prank: They opened the box to great fanfare, and then pretended to fumble the Bill of Rights onto the floor. The U.S. Marshals looked aghast—"They about crapped their pants," Wittman said—until the FBI agents roared with laughter.

Surprisingly, *Lost Rights* contains not only no index, but no illustrations—pet peeves both—both of which strike this reviewer as necessities for any serious nonfiction title. Call me nosy, but after reading about these unbelievable characters and despite Howard's sharp word portraits of them, I want to see Pratt's hulking shoulders, Matthews' toothy grin, Tillou's jug ears. I want to see a fine reproduction of this and other Bills of Rights and a sharp closeup of the docketing issue that helped pinpoint this particular copy to North Carolina. Show me the workaday First Federal Congress Project offices, the glitzy National Constitution Center, Pratt's antique shop, the televised press release announcing the seizure of the document.... No one would deny *Lost Rights* would be a better book with these additions.

Howard's *Lost Rights*, while not a treatise on replevin but a true crime story, will give the autograph community much food for thought on this very real and pressing issue. It's a marvel-

ous replevin case study, and in this instance this reviewer agrees that North Carolina had every right to aggressively pursue this document. Unvarnished greed on the part of dealers and others who ought to have known better...document sleuthing involving one of the Holy Grails of American documents... Howard's *Lost Rights* is a first class read that entertains as well as educates.

* * * * *

Although articles concerning autograph topics in magazines and journals are not within the domain of this column, I feel compelled to bring one to your attention: The June 2010 issue of *Smithsonian* (Volume 41, Number 3, pp. 72–80) features Doug Stewart's "To Be... or Not," subtitled "William-Henry Ireland Committed the Greatest Shakespeare Hoax Ever—and Fooled Even Himself Into Believing He Was the Bard's True Literary Heir." A fun if too-brief retelling of this fascinating forgery incident of late 18th century London. If this thumbnail version of a complicated tale piques your interest, get a hold of the forger's 1805 *Confessions of William-Henry Ireland: Containing the Particulars of His Fabrication of the Shakespeare Manuscripts*, which is readily available in a modern (i.e., 1969) and inexpensive hard-bound facsimile edition.

Society Scholarship Fund

Please
Support Our Campaign
To Create a Scholarship Endowment Fund
For Information, Contact

Robert K. O'Neill

37 Wendy Lane, Holliston, MA 01746,

oneillro@bc.edu