

## Fakes, Exhibits, and Autopens

WILLIAM BUTTS

**ISRAEL, Lee.** *Can You Ever Forgive Me? Memoirs of a Literary Forger.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008. 8vo. Hardbound, dust jacket. 129pp. Illustrations. **\$19.95.**

**SCHWARZ, Arthur L.** *Vivat Rex! An Exhibition Commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Accession of Henry VIII.* New York: Grolier Club, 2009. Small 4to. Softbound. vii, 236pp. Frontispiece, numerous color illustrations. **\$45.00.**

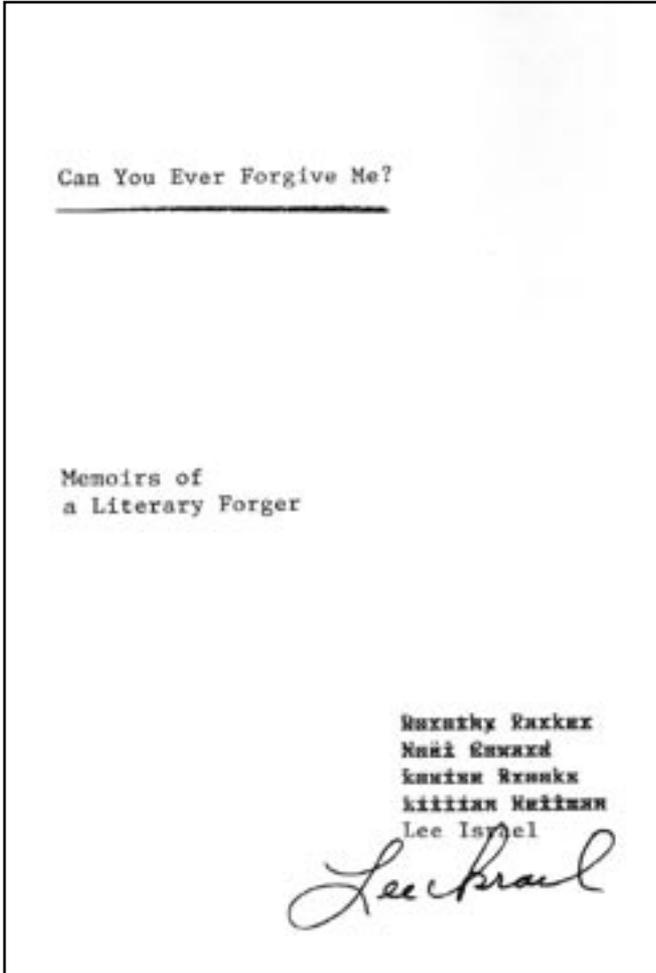
**KOSCHAL, Stephen, and WIEMER, Andreas.** *Presidents of the United States Autopen Guide.* Miami, FL 33231: Stephen Koschal, PO Box 311061, 2009. 8vo. Softbound. 84pp. Numerous illustrations. Edition limited to 100 numbered copies signed by both authors. **\$10.00.**

*Whew!!* I sighed with relief when the publisher of Lee Israel's *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* sent a review copy, for it allowed me to neatly sidestep the ethical dilemma facing any autograph collector or dealer curious about this book: Should I contribute to the success of *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* and line the pockets of this unrepentant forger and document thief by purchasing a copy?

On the other hand, having heard the “buzz” about this book caused by Thomas Mallon’s laudatory *New York Times* review, which characterized the book as “pretty damned fabulous” and provoked the fury of archivists and autograph types nationwide, I had to wonder: Are the autograph dealers and archivists who condemn this book simply closing ranks, circling the wagons, to protect the colleagues Israel so harshly ridicules? How many of them have actually read the book? Simply boycotting the very reading of *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* seems—well, unAmerican. So put this issue on hold and consider the book, then we’ll revisit this at the close.

From even *before* the get-go, *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* reeks of smug nonchalance. On the dust jacket front cover, at lower right, the author credit Dorothy Parker is typed (yes, typed, as in IBM Selectric) and “X”d out by typewriter; then below that the same with Noel Coward, then Louise Brooks, then Lillian Hellman; and lastly Lee Israel, the only name not “X”d out, with a facsimile of her signature beneath that. Thus the stark white jacket, with its title in 12-point typewriter font—the very image of humble simplicity, which I rather like—is undermined by this cheesy treatment of the author’s name before the reader even cracks the cover. Making matters worse, this foot-in-mouth attempt at humor continues on the rear jacket panel, which contains five harsh blurbs for the book—from five deceased entertainment personalities—Groucho Marx, Noel Coward, George S. Kaufman, Katherine Hepburn and Clara Blandick (*The Wizard of Oz*’s Auntie Em). Disingenuous, and their comments aren’t even funny.

In a nutshell, Israel, down-on-her-luck biographer of Tallulah Bankhead, Dorothy Kilgallen and Estee Lauder, became so fearful of losing her New York City apartment when her career nosedived that in 1991-92 she cranked out hundreds of typed letters signed mainly by literary and entertainment figures with gossipy, cranky attitude: Noel Coward, Louise Brooks, Edna Ferber, Dorothy Parker. These were “conceived, written, typed and signed” on appropriate manual typewriters Israel acquired. Her crime spree began opportunistically, when she stole three Fanny Brice letters from the Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center and succeeded in selling them to the Argosy Book Store for \$40 apiece. When she learned from them they “would pay



more for better content,” something seemed to click: A forger was born.

Israel’s brief but prolific success as a forger holds many lessons for those of us whose passion is ferreting out the spurious. The unusual talent she brought to the picture was that, as a professional writer of some skill, she was able and eager to go out on a limb and create juicy content letters. Many forgers stick to the safe and mundane in order to help evade detection. Not

so Israel: “I cobbled together faragoes, taking paragraphs from several letters, then mixing and matching, changing the prose slightly... I never duplicated word for word... I did, however, use certain verbatim sentences or phrases because they were just too good to be altered or excised.” Regarding her Louise Brooks letters, for instance, she notes, “there was invention and embellishment, but as with all my creations, I did not play fast and loose with large truths.”

Israel was not sophisticated, though, from the technical perspective of adding her subjects’ signatures. When researching them at archives, she traced their signatures on translucent paper. Failing at freehand imitation (“My signatures were shaky, uneven, a trail of lifted pencils and muscular betrayal. Shit!”), she ended up jerry-rigging a light box (a television turned face up) and doing a modified tracing (“My technique was a kind of riff on the actual signature, a tune played over the melody”). She stuck to subjects with simple signatures also. Edna Ferber? The “ease with which I reckoned I could forge the signature—*Ferb.*’ and sometimes *Edna.*,’ period after each—was a major selling point.” Lillian Hellman? “Happily, her signature was easy.”

The “signature easy” criteria she refers to may help rule *in* and rule *out* certain signers in studying letters as possible Israel forgeries. “Walt Disney, for instance, would have been out of the question: his signature looks like something underneath the Articles of Confederation.” For Noel Coward she made an exception. “I signed only ‘Noel’ because his complete signature—a flamboyant wraparound—was way beyond my elementary artistic abilities. The swashbuckling *N* was a challenge to which I brought various devices we used in high school geometry for forming arcs. To no avail. I did the best I could freehand.”

For letterhead she brought a photocopy of her subject’s actual letterhead to a job printer (“I was amused to be called Miss Hellman by one printer, and Mrs. Ferber by another”) and had inexpensive copies made. Later she stole blank paper of an appropriate age from archives. By the simple means of not dating most of her forged letters, “there could be no chronological *gotcha!*”

Of her canon, Israel claims “I composed over time more than one hundred fifty letters that I attributed to Noel Coward,” “ten or so Lillian Hellman,” and of her other subjects such as Brooks

she gives no estimates. All told, she maintains “approximately four hundred fakes I wrote from April 1990 until the summer of 1991.” Later on she added more subjects to her repertoire: Clara Blandick (“an easy forgery... a minor canon in my collective works”), Humphrey Bogart, “a couple of George S. Kaufmans,” some Bette Davises (which “did not fetch a good price”), Aldous Huxley, Eugene O’Neill and Kurt Weill.

The dealers to whom Israel sold her wares do not fare well. Though she contrived a plausible provenance, a fictional cousin whose collection she’d acquired, Israel quickly realized few were interested in hearing it—presumably part of the reason she snipes, “The dealers overall seemed spectacularly incurious.” (In their defense, what Israel never realizes in her spectacular naivete is that experienced dealers give justifiably scant attention to family tales because ultimately each document must stand on its own merit. Where these dealers really failed was in more thoroughly scrutinizing these lower-end documents—more on that in a bit.)

Although a number of dealers are mentioned in passing by name, it’s often unclear whether those named actually bought letters from Israel. At one point she pops into a tony Manhattan autograph gallery and finds two of her forged Dorothy Parker letters that she’d originally sold to another dealer for \$85 offered at \$2500 each. “I was nettled,” she notes. “I was going on trial as people were still making a great deal of money from the fruits of my labor. The extreme markups, which I’d not been aware of until this time, also annoyed me. Since the autograph business is gossipy and incestuous, I wondered how any dealers could not have known about the spurious pedigree of the letters.” In a delightful bit of vicious humor, Israel has the long dead Parker send the gallery owner a letter refuting the letters.

Regarding noted dealer Charles Hamilton (“Pink-cheeked, a lot of white hair... He looked and sounded like a Lutheran minister”), Israel offered him a good content Lillian Hellman letter. She declined his \$40 offer as “far below the hundred dollars that was commanding at this late stage in my career.” In another amazing display of her naivete, she remembers “wondering then, as I wonder now, whether Hamilton was onto me and was offering the piddling forty dollars in order to subject the letter to whatever arsenal of sophisticated technology he may have had

at his disposal.” *Sophisticated technology? Charles Hamilton?* Those phrases mix like oil and water. Hamilton offered \$40 because this late in the game his salad days were long past. He dabbled in lower-end material at this time, marketed through simple mimeographed lists. As for his arsenal, I would wager it would fit in the palm of your hand—I doubt he ever utilized anything more sophisticated than a magnifying glass.

Eventually Israel’s forgeries began to become suspect among her New York City clientele. She resorted to creating forgeries of original literary material she’d researched at universities, then stealing the originals and leaving her forgeries in their place. An alert dealer figured out the switch, a sting operation was set up—and Israel’s pen was stilled. She was found guilty, sentenced to the slap on the wrist that forgery often receives: five years’ probation, six month’ house arrest, restitution to victims “within my means.” (In other words, good luck collecting! At least one victim I know has yet to receive restitution.)

Anyone involved with autographs can learn from *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* Israel’s writing style is by turn pretentious and self-deprecating. She’s fond of peppering her text with annoyingly arcane foreign phrases and other bits of snobbery. In one instance of arrogance as monumental as it is ill-informed, for instance, she notes how she was “for a time the sensation of the raffish autograph business.” In the highly splintered world of autograph collectors and dealers, how would one determine this anyhow? But such rational thoughts would not cross this embarrassing egotistical mind. True, there may have been some “buzz” among New York and eastern dealers about the volume of her productions surfacing—but I wouldn’t want to repeat that stereotype about New Yorkers thinking the world revolves around their city!

Can we ever forgive Lee Israel? I’ll let her answer that: “The line ‘Can you ever forgive me?’ is mine. As I wrote it, I imagined the waiflike Dorothy Parker apologizing for any one of countless improprieties, omissions, and/or cutting bon mots... apologizing with no intention whatsoever of mending her wayward ways.” Is there any genuine repentance shown here? I’ll let one anecdote she recounts answer that: “[Two Noel Coward] letters were taken to be the real thing by editor Barry Day, a longtime student of Noel Coward’s life, and included in *The Letters of Noel*

*Coward...* For me, this was a big hoot and a terrific compliment." Elsewhere, she gushes, "The forged letters were larky and fun and totally cool... I still consider the letters to be me best work." Of her thefts from archives, she calls it "heartfelt... big-time wrong." Can anyone who's read her other comments, though, feel this doesn't smack of bald insincerity? Clearly Lee Israel only has one real regret about the whole forgery scam: That she got caught. Nowhere is any believable remorse expressed—no regret over the financial damage she brought upon her many victims, no regret over the bad name she gave the autograph collecting world, no regret over the permanent crimp put on the market for those authors whose letters she forged.

Better to know thy enemy—the forgers, thieves and con artists who can't be erased from the autograph world—as well as possible, and how better than a memoir actually penned by one of their own. Israel's forgeries succeeded out of sheer dumb luck. Her approach to creating them was straightforward and simple, she boldly wrote interesting content, and most important of all she quietly focused on low and medium-priced literary figures without drawing attention to herself.

My suggested solution to the ethical dilemma that opened this review? Check it out of your local library. If they haven't a copy on their shelves, request it through interlibrary loan. You *learn* and Ms. Israel doesn't *earn*.

### Henry the Eighth

If "*I'm Henery the Eighth, I am! Henery the Eighth I am, I am!*" a la Patrick Swayze is the extent of your knowledge of the English monarch—or if you're an autograph aficionado—Arthur L. Schwarz's *Vivat Rex! An Exhibition Commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Accession of Henry VIII* should not be missed.

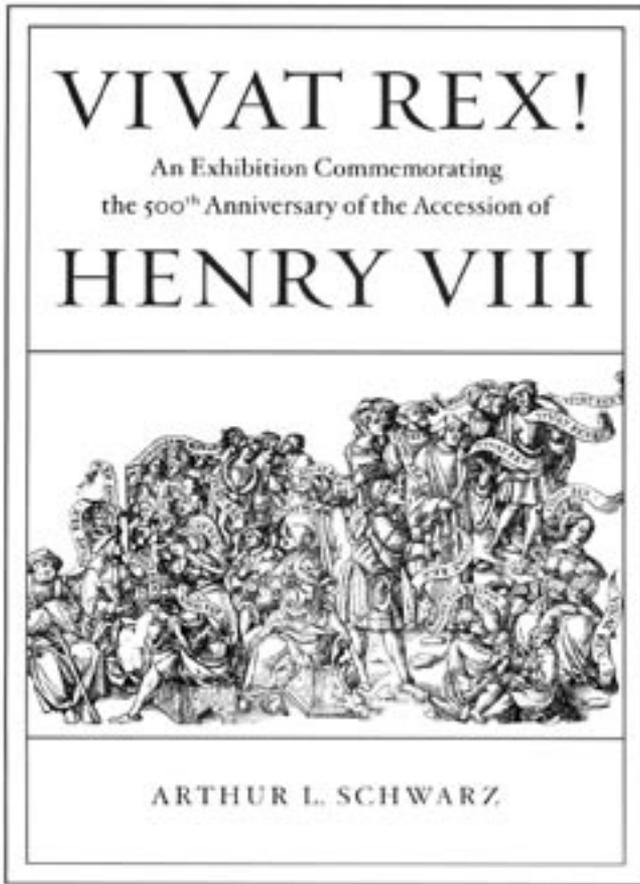
A new Grolier Club publication is usually cause for celebration among collectors of the subject under exhibition—as my reviews of their recent offerings in this column attest. But when the curator's collection is joined by the Folger Shakespeare Library, Harvard's Houghton Library and the Morgan Library and Museum, be prepared to be dazzled.

The extraordinary objects gathered from these distinguished collections for this exhibition seek to give a cumulative portrait of Henry VIII and to answer questions. "Who was he?" asks

Schwarz in his informative introduction. “Why was he important? What were his legacies? Was he the obese, bejeweled monarch of historical fiction, cinema, and television—husband of six wives, a tyrant and an oppressor—or is he more properly remembered as the founder of the Church of England, a generous benefactor, the king who led England into the modern era? Was he a leader in the world in which he lived, or was he dominated and obsessed by the requirements it put on him? Was he, perhaps, a combination of all of these elements, a multifaceted personality whose story explains much about England half a millennium ago and echoes even today?”

*Vivat Rex!* vividly, memorably shows how Henry VIII was indeed all of the above. Arranged chronologically, it consists of 140 books, documents and images (engravings, color lithographs, paintings, etc.) with not just captions, but rather lengthy explanatory texts placing each item into the context of Henry’s life. But before the display of treasures even begins, three enjoyable essays by three scholars help round out the picture: John Guy’s “The Personification of Power in Henry VIII,” Dale Hoak’s “The King’s ‘Great Matter,’” and Susan Wabuda’s “The Reformation of the English Church Under Henry VIII.” Schwarz himself thoughtfully includes a handy family tree to help keep Henry’s complex relationships untangled (the revolving door of his marriages has always been a blur to me) and a detailed chronology to keep his eventful life straight. And for neophytes to 16<sup>th</sup> century spelling practices a brief “Note on Spelling” provides a quick crash course.

*Vivat Rex!* doesn’t open with some precious memento from Henry’s 1491 birth, as you might expect, but rather with a large vellum 1545 document from near the end of his life—a routine legal conveyance granting several manors formerly owned by his advisor Thomas Cromwell (executed for treason) to another noble. Schwarz includes it for the enormous, fabulously penned and elaborately decorated “Henry” that begins the line of intricately calligraphed lettering across the top of the document. He also includes it for the magnificent original wax pendant seal that still hangs from a cord below the document, depicting “Henry in his mid-50s... aged, square-faced, and somewhat bloated.”



Documents are what will draw autograph collectors to this volume, and while they may not be abundant, they're choice. The most breathtaking is one drooled over already in this column in a review of a book about the Folger Shakespeare Library's treasures: *Commentum familiare in Ciceronis officia*—better described as Henry's personal childhood copy of a 1502 edition of Cicero's writings, with "Thys Boke Is Myne Prynce Henry" penned large and bold, complete with his margin comments. And how about

that *Incipiunt Hore Beate Marie Virginis secundum usum Sarum*? This 1498 prayer book of Henry's mother, Elizabeth of York, queen consort of Henry VII, bears her inked inscription: "Madam j pray yow Remember me in yowr good prayers yawr mastras Elyzabeth R."

Other Henry VIII family members are in evidence here as well. There's a remarkable 1531 two-page ALS from Henry's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, in which she complains bitterly to her nephew (Emperor Charles V) of Henry's treatment of her, maintaining her virginity at the time of their marriage despite having been briefly married to Henry's older brother Arthur. Notes Schwarz, this has been "on public view only once since [it] entered Pierpont Morgan's collection almost a century ago." Not to neglect the other spouses, there's a gorgeous 1533 vellum prayer book presented by fourth wife Anne of Cleves to her husband, inscribed "I besiche your grace humbly when ye loke on this remember me, your gracis assured anne the dowgher of cleues." Schwarz's comment that this "form of gift inscription, which brings to mind a modern young girl's autograph book in which a friend asks the receiver to 'remember me,' is more personal than most such inscriptions of the period," is well taken.

Friends and enemies of Henry VIII are also found in *Vivat Rex!* Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I writes Henry a letter in 1516, a routine letter of introduction for a newly-appointed diplomat. And his nemesis, King Francis I of France, is present in the form of a 1520 document he signs—an expense account for his famed "Field of Cloth of Gold" meeting with Henry VIII.

Primary documents in Henry's hand are here too. A 1513 vellum document from Henry orders a shopping list of luxurious goods from the keeper of the great wardrobe. A 1539 letter from Henry concerns those meeting Anne of Cleves upon her arrival from France and bringing her safely to London for their marriage. But the most spectacular by far is also the largest document in the exhibit at 8.5 feet in length: a 1539 list of New Year's gifts given by Henry and also received by him, signed on both sides.

Two real show-stoppers merit special mention. The first is a 1529 letter from Henry's Latin secretary, penned in Latin and partly encrypted, to Henry's advisor Cardinal Wolsey, discussing his meeting with Pope Clement VII in which he attempted to get Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon annulled. The second

is shockingly beautiful, one of the most unusual medieval manuscripts you'll ever see: A manuscript gospel book from circa 977 from Trier, 144 vellum leaves dyed in different each shades of purple and blue, each lettered largely in brilliant gold letters. "According to tradition," writes Schwarz, "this magnificent volume was presented to Henry by Pope Leo X in 1521, when he conferred upon him the title 'Defender of the Faith.' It is likely... that it was originally made for the coronation of Otto III...."

Books, books and more books grace the pages of *Vivat Rex!*—all of them worth gaping at, too. A few at random: *A pleasant History of the Life and Death of Will Summers* (London, 1637) is a biography of Henry's long-time court jester. The handsome copy pictured here "is the only known copy of the first edition... and this is the first time it has been on public view." *A devout treatyse in Englysshe called the Pylgrimage of perfection* (London, 1526) came from Henry's library, and bears his ownership signature and that of its next owners, Duke of Somerset Edward Seymour and Henry's daughter Queen Mary. There's even a copy of "the only published work actually attributed to Henry," *A glasse of the truthe* (London, 1932), a discussion of divorce. "This volume of Henry's writing, one of only three recorded copies of this edition, has never before been on public view." And let's not forget *A treatise provynge by the kynges lawes, that the byshops of Rome, had neuer ryght to any supremitie within this realme* (London, 1538), which argues that Henry and not the Pope has jurisdiction in England. "This copy is one of only four known surviving copies. It has never before been on public view." And so it goes, rarity upon rarity, a great many of them displayed for the first time in decades or for the first time *ever*. What a sight! Even the most unbookish should be awed by such overabundance of unique or near unique relics.

Fittingly, *Vivat Rex!* has been fittingly designed in a fashion reminiscent of 16<sup>th</sup> century printed texts. The title page is printed in red and black ink using a variety of typefaces and sizes and with plenty of horizontal rules, and every text page bears a fine ruled border. These and other appealing subtle touches give a courtly bow to the book's subject and lend it a distinctive classy feel.

If there be any weakness in *Vivat Rex!*, it would be the fact that only a few of the book's many illustrations are full page. Most are

quarter or half page, which in the case of document and title pages (of which there are a great many) frustrates any readers who want to closely *study* the illustrations. It's simply too small to capture enough detail. But that's the rub with the economics of publishing today—if you included all of the full-page illustrations all of us would like to see in *Vivat Rex!*, it would have to be priced so high few would buy it.

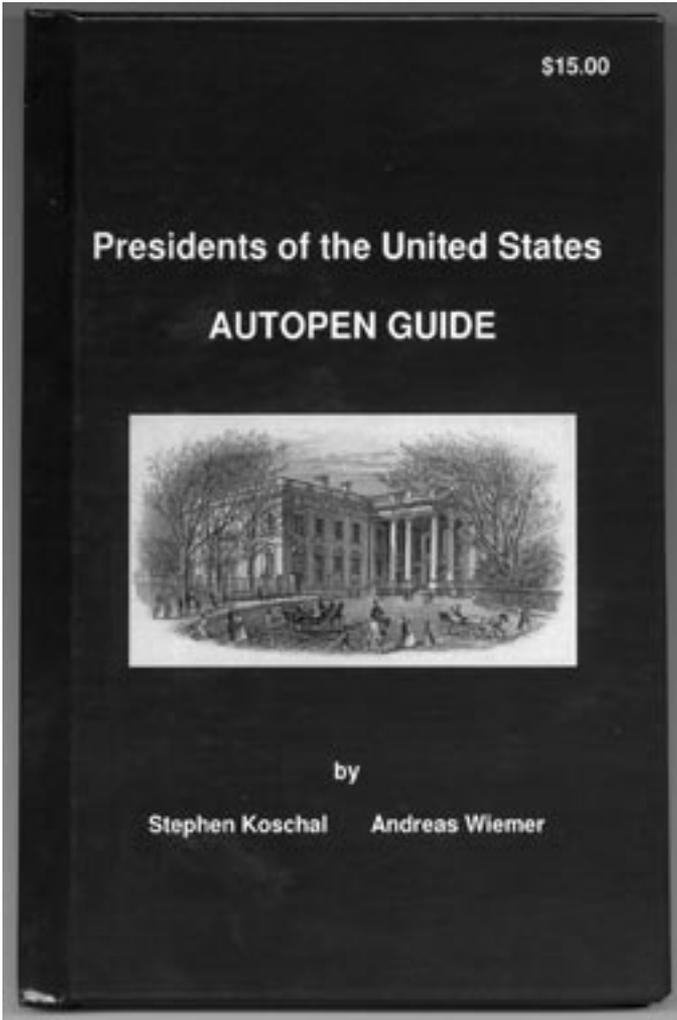
### Presidents and Autopens

I've got to hand it to Florida dealer Stephen Koschal: Seems like every time I turn around he's published another useful and bargain-priced reference source for collectors.

His latest, co-authored by German dealer Andreas Wiemer, is one of his handiest ever. *Presidents of the United States Autopen Guide* gathers together under one roof the largest gathering of Autopen exemplars ever assembled of every president who's used the dastardly contraption since Eisenhower first began using it as Army Chief of Staff in the late 1940s. It's a strange comment on the autograph collecting hobby that no such collection has been published before. Sure, there is Paul Carr's *The Eisenhower Files*, Charles Hamilton's *The Robot That Helped to Make a President*, Dwayne A. Bridges' *Lyndon Baines Johnson* as well as small obscure studies on Nixon, Ford, Reagan and Clinton's handwriting and signatures, along with articles on each president's use of the Autopen machine. But if you want a single source that gathers together the known Autopen matrixes of each president and nothing but, up until now there's been nothing.

Chapter by chapter, president by president, each known verifiable Autopen exemplar is illustrated—presumably at 100% actual size, although that's not stated. The number per page are kept down to four at most, with ample margins around each signature, which makes it easier for collectors to attempt side-by-side comparisons. Some may be taken aback to find out how very many Autopen matrixes were utilized by the Nixon, Reagan and Clinton offices; others may be surprised how few are used by Carter's office.

The quality of the illustrations is for the most part quite acceptable. Ironically, the signature illustrations for some of the more recent presidents are lacking in quality. Certain of the Reagan and Clinton signatures in particular have broken down



into a dot matrix- type pattern that will hinder side-by-side comparisons.

It's worth noting that in a brief preface the authors note they include "all the known and confirmed Autopen examples... There are illustrations in some other books of what is said to be an Autopen example of a certain President. However, with

extensive research... those examples could not be confirmed, therefore they are not illustrated in this book.” The assumption is that not a single additional example of these supposed Autopen signatures could be located, in which case their exception is wise indeed. Nevertheless, the purist in me wishes they had included all such examples in a brief “To Be Verified” section at the close of each chapter. Their very presence there might help bring forth additional samples from helpful readers, but if they’re not to be found there’s little chance of verification coming from outside—a little educational opportunity lost, in my opinion.

Of great interest and usefulness are some “Corrections” that follow several chapters. Here Koschal and Wiemer point out Autopen examples that have made their way into standard autograph reference books. In the Eisenhower “Corrections” page, for instance, they note an Eisenhower Autopen signature (including which specific example) identified as genuine in Kenneth Rendell’s book *Forging History*, including the page number, and another that appears in Larry Vrzalik and Michael Minor’s book *From the President’s Pen*. Prudent collectors who own copies of these books will make the comparison themselves and perhaps pencil a correction into these volumes.

Incidentally, the Obama “chapter” only illustrates a single Autopen matrix. Surely this chapter will fill out in subsequent printings.

At ten bucks a pop and only 100 copies, *Presidents of the United States Autopen Guide* will sell out quicker than you can say *fac-sim-i-le*. Let’s hope a second printing is already in the works, with a third not far behind and a fourth just up the road. It’s a worthwhile subject that certainly warrants wide distribution and much discussion.