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An unsolved crime can be a source of infinite frustration for the dedicated criminal detective. Similarly, the degree of accuracy of a historical account will often, perhaps too often, remain indefinitely shrouded in the mists of time. Both circumstances have a tendency to readily capture the inherent curiosity of the human intellect and stand as a source of continuous speculation to an eager public. In *The Forensic Historian*, author and historian Robert C. Williams combines the inextricably related subjects of crime and history, exploring some of history's most infamous unanswered questions, presenting them as investigatory "cold cases", and describing the conclusions reached by the forensic investigators who attempted to illuminate the unknown through the application of science and technology.

Williams is a historical scholar and the tone of the book reflects that background. The material contained within the relatively thin (143 pages) paperback text is certainly appropriate for university-level academic coursework, but the captivating content and comprehensibility of the writing will also appeal to a wider, general-knowledge audience.

Williams includes a selection of some of the more high-profile historical mysteries, dividing them into chapters loosely determined by the basic category of forensic science practices used in the examination of the evidence, for example chemical methods or techniques used as a means of personal identification. Iconic names such as Ivan the Terrible, King Tut, Beethoven, Adolf Hitler, John F. Kennedy, Napoleon and more are represented in the cases discussed within the book - cases which allow the author to provide a reasonably comprehensive and entertaining narrative of some of the historical events that helped shape the modern world.

Each separate incident is presented individually as a subsection within the chapters. The consummate historian, Williams provides ample, some might even say superfluous, background information establishing the chronicled context and historical relevance of the circumstances surrounding the mystery. In contrast, the descriptions and explanations of the scientific techniques and methods used to conduct the forensic analyses are relatively scant. Usually, a brief description of the technique or procedure is included, along with a very general explanation of the underlying science. Still, to the non-scientist reader the detail is likely to be considered entirely adequate. Those with a more advanced degree of scientific education will detect minor technical errors in the descriptions of certain scientific concepts and principles, but these deficiencies minimally detract from the intended thesis and are indicative of a limitation of the author's scientific understanding and not of the scientific techniques themselves.

A warning is appropriate to those readers hoping to obtain absolute resolution. The results of many of the forensic investigations presented in the book may seem wholly unsatisfying to those seeking definitive conclusions. Instead, the author appears to

suggest, and rightly so, that forensic analysis, though revolutionary, is still incapable of providing unambiguous results in every instance. In fact, Williams seems to repeatedly propose that forensic testing is merely one aspect of any investigation - be it historical, criminal, or both – which aids investigators in arriving at conclusions. In addition, Williams appears to further suggest that all forms of analyses and accounts, forensic or otherwise, are subject to individual interpretations which may additionally affect the derivation of a conclusion. In short, though forensic analyses may provide new data to an investigation, there are mysteries which will remain unsolved. In Williams’ words, “More often, science simply adds another dimension to the historical argument without end.”

The book is an excellent source of historical knowledge and includes a wide and varied selection of fascinating case studies gleaned from various periods of antiquity, some ancient and some relatively modern. Some of the items described in the book as being subjected to forensic analysis include the Vinland map, a hacker’s computer hard drive, the bones of a mummy, forged artwork, the Shroud of Turin, the desiccated heart of a French royal, and iron rivets from the Titanic. The text is rife with interesting and relevant quotations and sufficient illustrations to provide a full measure of understanding of the content. The references provided at the conclusion of each chapter are fairly extensive and include helpful commentary by the author offering insight into the relative strengths and weaknesses of each source.

Williams is an engaging story-teller and his commitment to providing a comprehensive historical account is apparent. However, there are instances where the writing style, though still entertaining and at times humorous, can make the exact chronology of events seem confused. In addition, the descriptions and details sometimes

become repetitive in nature. Still, the material has obviously been conscientiously researched and the sheer volume of content, both historical and forensic science-related, is impressive for such a moderately short work.

Due to its unique and extremely specific nature the book is probably inappropriate for adoption as a text in either general history or general forensic sciences courses, but could easily be utilized as an ancillary resource in certain academic offerings. The ideal scheme might involve a course which was team-taught between a historical academician, who could establish the historical foundation of each episode, and a forensic scientist, who could effectively elucidate the underlying principles of the scientific techniques used to examine the physical “evidence”. Outside the realm of academia and the designation of “required reading” however, this book would be thoroughly enjoyed by any person with either an interest in history or the forensic sciences or both.

Reference

Williams, R. (2013). *The Forensic Historian: Using Science to Reexamine the Past*.

Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.