

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of *The Scientific Examination of Documents, Methods and Techniques, Second Edition*

REFERENCE: Ellen D. The scientific examination of documents, methods and techniques, 2nd ed., Taylor & Francis Ltd., London, 1997, 180 pp.

In the preface to this edition, the author points out that the object of the book is to provide an outline of the subject and that the intended audience is those interested individuals outside the field of document examination. Most books on document examination contain some disclaimer of this sort—that they are intended for lawyers or investigators who may have need for the services of a professional document examiner, and have more than a passing interest of what expertise in the field is comprised. In most texts, this is a sort of “cover story” strategy designed to serve one or more of the following purposes: to provide some protection to experienced document examiners (maybe especially the authors themselves) when a cross-examining attorney tries to use the book as an authority in the field or learned treatise; to prevent the naive from using the text as the sole training source; or perhaps to extend the longevity of the work since an overview would not tend to go out of date quite as fast as a treatise. Most authors then attempt to be a textbook reference for document examiners despite their claims to the contrary.

This book is a notable exception. For the most part, it really does address itself to providing an outline of the methods and techniques that are suitable for an audience outside the field. It is somewhat ironic that this adherence to its objective makes the book difficult to review for a forensic science journal. It is enough of an overview

that it contains little of interest to the practicing document examiner. Its references are primarily *Journal of Forensic Science*, *Journal of the Forensic Science Society*, and *Forensic Science International*; the experienced examiner may as well go directly to those resources and skip the middleman.

However, let me give the author his due. He treads a narrow path, avoiding, for the most part, superficiality on the one hand, and unnecessary technical detail on the other. One can imagine him describing his subject to a jury in just such a manner. And here is where the book can be recommended to the forensic examiner! To any examiner who has struggled with a description of a method or technique, trying to hone it down to clarity without losing significant content, Mr. Ellen has done a lot of your work for you. Almost every subheading has been reduced to a paragraph or two, suitable for the general public. I only wish he had provided a glossary so that the reader could have his definitions as readily at hand.

The citation of references is not quite as focused to the audience as is the text. References are listed at the end of each chapter, under the heading “Further reading.” This seems like a good approach, encouraging the reader to look further and not have to wade through hundred of references at the end of the book.

Most chapters list about 40 references, covering a wide variety of topics, for the most part, from easily obtainable sources. However, in Chapter 5, the subject of which is collecting handwriting samples, there is but one reference, and that from 1965. Surely this subject is among the most important to investigators and there are materials available to which they could be referred. Likewise, Chapter 11 on court testimony contains but one reference. Since attorneys might be expected to be a large portion of the readership, it would seem wise to flesh out this list.

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