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Citation Information

Marianne Wesson, *"Particular Intentions": The Hillmon Case and the Supreme Court*, 18 LAW & LITERATURE 343 (2006), available at <https://scholar.law.colorado.edu/faculty-articles/381>.

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“Particular Intentions”

THE HILLMON CASE AND THE SUPREME COURT

Marianne Wesson*

Abstract. The case of Mutual Life Insurance Company v. Hillmon is one of the most influential decisions in the law of evidence. Decided by the Supreme Court in 1892, it invented an exception to the hearsay rule for statements encompassing the intentions of the declarant. But this exception seems not to rest on any plausible theory of the categorical reliability of such statements. This article suggests that the case turned instead on the Court's attachment to a particular narrative about the events that gave rise to the case, events that produced a corpse of disputed identity. The author's investigations into newspaper archives and the original case documents make the case for a different account, and propose that this important rule of evidence may have grown out of a historical error, committed by a Court too eager to narrate an attractive story.

Every lawsuit begins and ends as a story, and sometimes it's even a really ripping tale, teeming with plot, character, and suspense. But the law's insistence on distillation and abstraction ensures that ordinarily a casual student of the lawsuit, reading an appellate opinion, can catch only fleeting and sometimes misleading glimpses of the story. The narrative movement in legal scholarship has attempted, among its other projects, to excavate some of the stories thus concealed.¹ This article gives an account of one such undertaking, and its unexpected discovery that the narrative urge and an inauthentic document—a fake—may have made a significant and ironic contribution to the evolution of the law of evidence.

In the spring of 1879, a young Kansas woman named Sallie Hillmon² filed claims against the policies that three insurance companies had issued on the life of

Law & Literature, Vol. 18, Issue 3, pp. 343–402. ISSN 1535-685X, electronic ISSN 1541-2601.

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John Hillmon, her husband of six months. John had died, she said, in a firearms accident at a campsite in rural southwest Kansas. Life insurance fraud was common in late nineteenth century America,³ and the companies refused to pay the claims, maintaining that her husband was not dead. In July of 1880, negotiations broke down and she commenced lawsuits against them. The case⁴ was tried six times, and twice received plenary consideration on appeal by the United States Supreme Court. The narrative aspects of the Hillmon case have not been altogether neglected: because Mrs. Hillmon was a young woman, innocent of apparent influence or connections, and because the insurers were powerful eastern corporations, in its time the Hillmon case was regarded as an entertaining David-and-Goliath struggle and a contest between teams of celebrity lawyers.⁵ But among litigators and law students, the case is chiefly remembered today because in the course of considering the trial court's exclusion of certain epistolary evidence, the Supreme Court created the important "state of mind" exception to the hearsay rule for expressions of the intentions of the speaker or writer. In practice this rule has, like all persisting legal doctrines, become somewhat abstracted from the case that gave it birth. Yet in many ways it remains profoundly wedded to its origins in a dispute about the identity of the corpse found at the campground, and thus embedded in a classic mystery narrative.

The *Hillmon* decision has proven one of the most durable examples of nineteenth-century case law. Many decisions of that era concerning the rules of evidence enjoy little continuing vitality, in part because they often have a vague or *ipse dixit* quality to them,⁶ but *Hillmon* is different: cited as the basis of one of the hearsay exceptions codified in 1975 by the Federal Rules of Evidence, its facts parsed and studied by lawyers bent on persuading judges that its precedent should be viewed in one way or the other, it is a case that every student of evidence, every trial lawyer, and every judge knows and remembers. The state of mind exception, at least as it pertains to expressions of intention, rests on very little ground other than the authority of *Hillmon*; more than nearly any other rule of evidence, it owes its existence to a single decision.

The subject of the Court's opinion was the admissibility, over a hearsay objection, of a certain letter. Ostensibly written by a young man to his sweetheart back home, the letter is an object that a student of film theory might call the McGuffin.⁷ *Mutual Life Insurance Co. v. Hillmon* held that this particular McGuffin was admissible, happily for the story that could not satisfactorily be told without it, and there is no denying that it is an altogether shapely and rewarding tale. But it will be my claim here that the story as

conventionally understood is not true, and its McGuffin was not an authentic document at all, but a fake. I will argue that the narrative exigencies of the story it felt compelled to tell led the Court to create an ill-considered but remarkably resilient legal doctrine, and that the venerability and importance of this doctrine have led us to remember the events—the story—of the *Hillmon* case in a way that validates the Court's enterprise of rule invention, but cannot survive a closer inquiry into the historical record. Altogether, the *Hillmon* matter serves as a beautiful illustration of the influence that certain narrative imperatives may bring to bear on the creation of legal rules.

THE CORPSE AT THE CAMPGROUND

The *Hillmon* case was tried twice, in 1882 and 1885, to juries that were unable to decide on a unanimous verdict. It was a verdict for Sallie Hillmon in the third trial, in 1888, that eventuated in the famous Supreme Court decision of 1892.⁸ The ultimate contested factual issue in all of the trials was the identity of a man who died at a campsite on Crooked Creek, near Medicine Lodge, Kansas, leaving behind a body whose demise far predated the availability of twentieth-century methods for the identification of biological material. Sallie Hillmon and her attorneys insisted that the corpse was her husband's, and there was evidence that this was the case, including identifications of the body (when it was fresher) by Sallie Hillmon and many of those who knew Hillmon when he was alive⁹, and statements made on some occasions by Hillmon's traveling companion at the time, John H. Brown. In Brown's original account, as well as in his later pretrial deposition, he said he had shot Hillmon accidentally while unloading a firearm from a wagon while the two men were camped near the place called Crooked Creek.¹⁰

The insurance companies argued that the deceased was not Hillmon, whom they accused of absconding in the service of an insurance swindle, but an innocent victim, a man whom they claimed Hillmon and John H. Brown had lured to Crooked Creek for the precise purpose of killing him and leaving his body behind to be passed off as Hillmon's. There was some evidence that *this* was the case, including witnesses who swore the body (or a photograph of it) could not have been Hillmon,¹¹ and a written statement sworn to by John H. Brown on another occasion, in which he affirmed the companies' version, saying that the victim was an individual named "Joe" whom he and Hillmon had picked up in Wichita and persuaded to accompany them west.¹²

Other evidence adduced by the defendants in the various trials included testimony from several persons who identified the dead man as Frederick Adolph Walters, once a citizen of Ft. Madison, Iowa, and the betrothed of a Miss Alvina Kasten, also of Ft. Madison.¹³ It was not disputed that Mr. Walters had left Ft. Madison in March of 1878 for the purpose of bettering his condition, and had traveled widely in the Midwest for a year or so. The defendant insurance companies claimed that Walters found himself in Wichita in March of 1879¹⁴, and it is here that the McGuffin, or letter, comes into the story.

Indeed it was claimed in the third trial that there had been two letters from Mr. Walters posted from Wichita to Ft. Madison in early March of 1879, one to Miss Kasten and the other to Mr. Walters' sister Elizabeth Rieffenach, although the Rieffenach letter was, in fact, never produced.¹⁵ In the first two trials (as well as in the last three) the Kasten letter was received as an exhibit, supported by the pretrial deposition testimony of Miss Kasten about her receipt of it.¹⁶ Mrs. Rieffenach, the sister of the missing man, claimed that the letter she had received from her brother could not be found, and in some of the trials her rather remarkably detailed testimony concerning its contents was allowed.¹⁷ The contents of the two missives varied in a fashion one might expect considering the writer's relationships to the addressees, but according to the testimony and evidence each letter informed the recipient that the author was in Wichita but planned to leave that city soon with a "man by the name of Hillmon" (in the sister's account of her letter, "a certain Mr. Hillmon"). The letters described Hillmon as a sheep trader, and the fiancée's letter explained the writer's decision to accompany this stranger, rather than follow many other young men of the time west to the Colorado mines in search of gold, with the revelation that Hillmon had "promised me more wages than I could make at anything else." Each of the women described her respective letter as the last communication she had ever enjoyed from Mr. Walters.¹⁸

These letters were obviously useful to the defense, both in suggesting an alternate identity for the corpse and in corroborating Brown's statement that he and Hillmon had lured a victim to accompany them on their journey. It's difficult for any reader of the Court's 1892 decision to resist the conviction aroused by Mr. Justice Gray's description of the letters—that the Crooked Creek corpse belonged to Frederick Adolph Walters. It's nearly impossible to regard as coincidence that Frederick Adolph Walters, shortly before the death at the campground, encountered a man named Hillmon in Wichita, left that town with him, and was never heard from again; murder is the obvious explanation.

Yet the first two juries were unconvinced of murder, at least enough of the jurors to produce two mistrials. The third jury, however, pondered a different mix of evidence: in that trial Sallie's lawyers apparently realized for the first time that the Kasten letter and the testimony of Elizabeth Rieffenach about the one she said she had received were hearsay, and made appropriate objections. Judge Shiras of the Circuit Court in Topeka sustained the objections and barred mention of either letter.¹⁹ The jury, thus unaware of the letters, returned a verdict for Mrs. Hillmon, and the insurance companies appealed. The Supreme Court's decision overturning that verdict contains its famous language about what has become known as the "state of mind" exception to the hearsay rule.

THE BIRTH OF THE STATE OF MIND EXCEPTION

The language from the Court's opinion that has been remembered (and codified) is this:

The existence of a particular intention in a certain person at a certain time being a material fact to be proved, evidence that expressed that intention at that time is as direct evidence of that fact, as his own testimony that he then had that intention would be. . . . The letters in question were competent not as narratives of facts communicated to the writer by others, nor yet as proof that he actually went away from Wichita, but as evidence that, shortly before the time when other evidence tended to show that he went away, he had the intention of going, and of going with Hillmon, which made it more probable both that he did go and that he went with Hillmon than if there had been no proof of such intention. In view of the mass of conflicting testimony introduced upon the question whether it was the body of Walters that was found in Hillmon's camp, this evidence might properly influence the jury in determining that question.

The rule applicable to this case has been thus stated by this court: "Whenever the bodily or mental feelings of an individual are material to be proved, the usual expressions of such feelings are original and competent evidence. Those expressions are the natural reflexes of what it might be impossible to show by other testimony. If there be such other testimony, this may be necessary to set the facts thus developed in their true light, and to give them their proper effect. As independent, explanatory, or corroborative evidence it is often indispensable to the due administration of justice. Such declarations are regarded as verbal acts, and are as competent as any other testimony, when relevant to the issue. Their truth or falsity is an inquiry for the jury."²⁰

With this reasoning the Court reversed the trial judge and sent the case back to be tried anew, directing that the evidence of the two letters be allowed. The Court's language is scarcely transparent, however, especially to the eye of a reader a century later. What does the Court mean when it suggests that expressions of intention are (at least sometimes) "verbal acts"? Today we reserve that description for utterances the saying of which *per se* transforms the legal situation of the speaker and/or another—for example words of gift, of contract, or of consent.²¹ It is characteristic of such locutions that they effect this transformation whether or not they are "true"; they are not actually hearsay at all, because they are not offered to prove the truth of some matter asserted.²² Descriptions of one's intention to go to a certain place are not, ordinarily, in that category—certainly not when offered solely as proof that the person did go to that place. Such declarations would be probative only if true—would be, that is, hearsay. The Court spreads this confusion around a bit by borrowing from an earlier case the proposition that the "truth or falsity" of statements like those in the letters is "an inquiry for the jury."²³ But the rule excluding hearsay, which the Court does not purport to repeal in this case or any other, rests precisely on the notion that the truth or falsity of some extrajudicial utterances is too challenging for the determination of a jury that has been deprived of a chance to observe the declarant and hear him cross-examined under oath.

What could account for the Court's unconvincing reasoning and doubtful rulemaking in the *Hillmon* case? Even a modest version of the hearsay exception for the expressed intentions of a hearsay declarant, that is a version allowing expressions of intention to prove only the genuineness of the intention, does not rest on any plausible theory of reliability; it lacks any justification in the sort of armchair psychology that prompted the invention of, say, the exceptions for dying declarations²⁴ or statements against interest.²⁵ On the contrary, it would seem to be easier to lie about one's intentions than about nearly anything else, since the likelihood of being caught out in a lie is small—any discovery of later acts incompatible with the expressed intention can always be explained by the simple phrase "I changed my mind." The more robust version of the exception endorsed by the *Hillmon* court is even less grounded in reliability, since allowing an expression of intention as evidence that the intention was accomplished disregards the folk wisdom that there is "many a slip 'twixt cup and lip."²⁶

One could ascribe the Court's curious misstep here to generalized hostility toward Sallie Hillmon and her suit.²⁷ But the Court did not need to reach out to invent the state of mind exception to send Mrs. Hillmon's case back for retrial; it had already decided, before addressing the matter of the Walters letters, that Judge Shiras erred reversibly by granting the insurance company defendants too few peremptory challenges.²⁸ Indeed, the dispute about the letters seems to have been a secondary consideration in the minds of the defendants' lawyers. The companies' principal argument before the Court concerned the peremptory challenge question, and they placed the matter of the letters far down their list of assigned errors.²⁹ Nevertheless, after disposing rather briskly of the challenge issue, the Court observed that "[t]here is . . . one question of evidence so important, so fully argued at the bar, and so likely to arise upon another trial, that it is proper to express an opinion on it,"³⁰ and then proceeded to consider the trial court's decision to exclude evidence of the Walters letters. There were many other points of error assigned by the insurance companies in their appeal, not a few of which were equally likely to "arise upon another trial," but it was the hearsay question that the Court chose to address.

The Court's general pro-business orientation during the 1880's and 1890's might be suspected of playing a role in the Hillmon decision, but it does not seem likely that the Hillmon decision arose entirely from the Court's pro-capitalist impulse. The creation of a new exception to the hearsay rule was not *ex ante* a victory for business, except in this one case; in the future, this novel doctrine was as likely to be employed by an individual litigant, or the government, as by a business organization.

If puzzled, we may be enlightened a bit by one available source of direct information about the Court's thinking in the Hillmon matter. Justice Horace Gray, who wrote the opinion of the Court, had at the time a remarkably competent secretary (today we would say law clerk): Ezra Ripley Thayer, later to become Dean of the Harvard Law School and a noted evidence teacher and scholar. In Dean Thayer's teaching notes he recounts that, contrary to the Court's description of the matter as "fully argued at the bar," the case for admitting the hearsay letters was "miserably argued."³¹ The companies' counsel, he reports, put forward "practically no ground" except course of business—that is, the business records exception. Justice Gray's opinion also notes that the insurance companies' counsel had rested their argument for the admissibility of the letters chiefly on this exception, one he dismisses immediately as profoundly unsuited to the Walters correspondence. According to Thayer, the Court in

conference nevertheless voted to overturn the trial court's ruling on "general principles."³² In any event, Thayer noted that Justice Gray, assigned to write the opinion, was in "dense darkness" until he (Thayer) "fed him with matter obtained with J.B.T."³³—that is, from James Bradley Thayer, the young secretary's father, himself a scholar of the law of evidence at Harvard.

At the time the Hillmon case was argued, it seems the Supreme Court building housed a Court that would object to the exclusion of the letters on principles too general to be articulated but too powerful to be omitted from its holding, a Justice assigned to author an opinion but more than willing to leave the fine points to his clerk, and a young scholar so eager to leave his mark on the law of evidence that he would seek guidance in *ex parte* correspondence with his famous father, incorporate their invention into the Court's opinion, and later boast that it was his idea, and not the clueless Justice Gray's, to cobble together this new exception to the hearsay rule.

And yet these converging antagonists to Sallie Hillmon's victory, who suffered from no apparent motives more nefarious than ordinary ambition or professional fatigue, cannot altogether account for the invention of the state of mind exception. There is something more powerful at work: the urge to complete a just and intelligible narrative. One proponent of narrative legal theory proposes the maxim *Da mihi facta, abo tibi ius* ("give me the facts, then I will give you the law"),³⁴ and several scholars have remarked the inseparable character of the activities of law-making and fact-finding (or storytelling).³⁵ Persuaded by these accounts, I believe that narrative exigencies, rather than any policy views regarding the advisability of a hearsay exception for statements of intention, drove the Court's 1892 decision in the Hillmon case.

There is even a narrative tradition in which the story as it was understood by the Court—that is, the story of Hillmon's criminality and Walters' victimization—would fall: that of the romance. The appeal of this variety of narrative has been persuasively identified by Robin West with natural law jurisprudence,³⁶ a system of thought that would have informed the jurisprudential inclinations of many members of the Supreme Court in 1892.³⁷ West relies on the analytic categories explicated by Northrop Frye, who instructs that in romance, "subtlety and complexity are not much favored. Characters tend to be either for or against the quest. If they assist it they are idealized as gallant or pure; if they obstruct it they are characterized as villainous or cowardly."³⁸ Frye also suggests that in romance, "[t]he enemy is associated with winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age, and the hero with spring, dawn, order, fertility, vigor, and youth."³⁹

On the dimension of comedy and tragedy, the Court's implicit narrative tends toward the comic, which according to Frye "celebrates the virtue of the dominant social group" and "protects the group against assault from outsiders."⁴⁰ Of course, insurance companies are not very plausible romantic heroes, which may explain why the defendants put so much stock in the Walters theory: a young adventurer seeking his fortune away from home while trying to maintain ties to his betrothed and family can be portrayed as a perfect gentle knight. The resulting narrative is nearly irresistible, especially to a Court already inclined toward natural law.

Then there is the circumstance that the crucial piece of evidence was a *letter*. From Poe's purloined letter to the "letters of transit" in *Casablanca*, the epistle has played a central role in the American narrative tradition. In American and British literature and popular culture letters were sometimes emblematic of intrigue or deception, but that was because their seal permitted intimate disclosures between correspondents. Rarely were they depicted as carriers of falsehood; more often, the receipt or discovery of a letter and the truth it tells explains what has been a mystery (for example, Darcy's behavior toward Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*). Either they have an instrumental use unrelated to any proposition they convey, like "letters of transit"; or letters are concealed sources of (sometimes unwelcome) truth, like Poe's letter, which (we are given to understand) is incriminating to its owner precisely because of its candor and intimacy.

Thus in both popular and literary understanding at the time of the *Hillmon* case, letters were artless documents unlikely to contain lies.⁴¹ And unless the reader forces herself into an attitude of doubt about its authenticity, the "Dearest Alvina" letter that the Court found so convincing (and consequently, as I believe, so plainly admissible) seems artless in the extreme. From its unstudied grammar ("There is so many folks in this country that have got the Leadville fever, and if I would not have got the situation that I have now, I would of went there myself") to its clumsy expressions of affection ("When I get back you will get to see me in about the same way we parted (you bet)"), the document appears to be devoid of contrivance. Moreover, it is not just any missive, but a *love letter*, or *billet-doux*—that is, intended for no one's eyes except Miss Kasten's and unlikely to be seen by any other reader. In such an intimate piece of correspondence, what would be the point of a falsehood about having met "a man by the name of Hillmon"? (Probably these musings are what the Court meant by its allusion to "circumstances precluding a suspicion of misrepresentation.")

Of course, any doubt about the authenticity of the letter might spoil its appearance of transparency, but none was raised by Sallie Hillmon's lawyers. Elated, as well they might have been, by their tardy realization that the letter was hearsay (and not admissible by any exception to the rule recognized at the time) they seem to have placed all of their energy into defending its exclusion on those grounds.

The Court that decided *Hillmon* was not interpreting a statute or a Constitution; it was unconstrained by any text whatsoever. The rules of evidence were commonly invented by judges, case by case, and at the time there were no critics suggesting that this enterprise partook of "judicial activism" or any other questionable philosophy. Inattentive though they may have been to the details of their decision, the Justices must have believed they were doing justice by inventing a hearsay exception for statements describing the intentions of the speaker. For truth to prevail (and for Hillmon's swindle to be thwarted), the letters had to be part of the story; for the letters to be part of the story, they had to be admissible; for the letters (unquestionably hearsay) to be admissible, some exception to the hearsay rule had to be found; if one could not be found, it must be invented. *Da mihi facta, abo tibi ius.*

HILLMON'S ICONIC PERSISTENCE

More than judicial narrative anxiety is required, however, to explain the veneration that the Hillmon doctrine has encountered over the ensuing years, for not all nineteenth-century decisions concerning the law of evidence have so impressively endured, nor been so generously interpreted. Yet here as well, narrative theory has a contribution to make. The Hillmon story, with its familiar motifs (populism, corporate greed, wily frontier drifters, hardscrabble lives made bearable by the possibility of windfall wealth, the sudden production of a document to end disputes among contesting eyewitnesses), is a candidate for the status Jonathan Yovell has called "invisible precedent."⁴² As with Yovell's example, the murder of a fellow gambler by the brutal Englishman Thurtell, the narrative itself is so engaging and so resonant that the mere invocation of it enhances the prestige of subsequent productions. In literature or other cultural environments, this process represents the ordinary progress of culture. But if the later artifacts are legal productions—that is, decisions or rules—the citation of the original may suc-

ceed in substituting the narrative virtues of the source for reasoned analysis. Thus do good stories become law, or pieces of law—although the features that make the stories good ones may not necessarily survive the transformation, and excellent narratives may metamorphize into bad laws.

The role the *Hillmon* case played in the formation of one of the Federal Rules of Evidence exemplifies this process. Although later commentators raised doubts about the rule of *Hillmon*, especially the expansive version,⁴³ its holding was incorporated 83 years after its announcement into Rule 803(3). That rule, demarking an exception to the hearsay rule, reads (in pertinent part):

The following are not excluded by the hearsay rule, even though the declarant is available as a witness: . . . A statement of the declarant's then existing state of mind, emotion, sensation, or physical condition (such as intent, plan, motive, design, mental feeling, pain, and bodily health), but not including a statement of memory or belief to prove the fact remembered or believed . . .

By itself (especially in light of the qualification of the last phrase) this rule might be read to exclude such materials as the Walters letters, or at least to require strict confinement of their use to proving the intentions of the declarant, and prohibit their employment to prove any past acts, or anyone else's intentions. But it has not on the whole been read that way, in part because the influential Advisory Committee's Note to that rule states: "The rule of *Mutual Life Insurance Co. v. Hillmon*, . . ., allowing evidence of intention as tending to prove the doing of the act intended is, *of course*, left undisturbed."⁴⁴

Note the emphatic *of course* deployed in the midst of the comment. Although other Advisory Committee Notes are thoughtful, analytical, occasionally critical—even of Supreme Court precedents⁴⁵—in this Note the mere mention, the invocation, of *Hillmon* begins and ends the discussion. The case has become iconic, and thus unquestionable. Moreover, the cause of narrative coherence requires that its rule must be construed to sustain the story of deception and conspiracy that the case is understood to tell. The letters must, in this cause, be admissible in all of their aspects and implications—they must illuminate not only what Walters intended and did, but also what Hillmon intended and did. Unless the letters are allowed this explanatory force, the story is missing essential ingredients that are required to satisfy our curiosity and our hunger for a just narrative.

AN ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE

Suppose a case were to be made for the truth of quite a different narrative, one in which the corpse belongs to Hillmon after all? In particular, suppose that the story's McGuffins, the famous letters, were fakes, or (in the case of the Rieffenach letter) never existed? The possibility of any such plausible narrative may seem small given all of the foregoing discussion, but that is in part because the authenticity of the Walters letters is taken for granted; the quarrel over their admissibility as hearsay seems to have exhausted any skepticism about their provenance on the part of Mrs. Hillmon's lawyers. It is also in part because partisans of the defendants have played a suspiciously large role in constructing the Hillmon story in historical memory.

Most persons familiar with the Hillmon case take their understanding of it from a few sources: the Supreme Court's opinion, a 1925 Harvard Law Review article by John MacArthur Maguire entitled *The Hillmon Case: Thirty-Three Years After*;⁴⁶ and a lengthy account of the case found in the 1913 edition of Dean Wigmore's famous treatise on the law of evidence, *The Principles of Judicial Proof*.⁴⁷ Those more historically inclined might search out an article by historian Brooks W. Maccracken, published in *American Heritage* magazine in 1968.⁴⁸ Although the Maguire article is somewhat critical of the apparent breadth of the Hillmon doctrine, in none of these accounts would the reader find much to disturb her impression that the exclusion of the Walters letters would have been a hindrance to discovering the true identity of the corpse at Crooked Creek. Lovers of truth, and those attached to the idea that the rules of evidence on the whole promote its realization, will find little to disturb them in their consideration of the *Hillmon* case if it rests on these sources.

But these accounts, especially the Wigmore excerpt, are subject to a certain amount of impeachment when examined alongside more contemporaneous documents. Maccracken, author of the engaging *American Heritage* article, confesses that his "principal authority" was a report he says was prepared by the Kansas State Superintendent of Insurance; this is the same account that is republished in the Wigmore treatise.⁴⁹ Although Maccracken acknowledges that the individual who authored the report was "of counsel for the insurance companies in the second trial," he does not seem to consider that this circumstance might have affected the reliability of the account.⁵⁰

In fact the author of this report, which was written after the third trial had resulted in a verdict for Mrs. Hillmon but before the Supreme Court had

rendered its decision,⁵¹ was not the Superintendent of Insurance at all, but a lawyer and businessman named Charles Gleed. Not merely “of counsel,” he was attorney of record for the defendant insurance companies in both the second and third trials of the *Hillmon* case.⁵² Newspaper accounts and court records confirm that he and his firm continued to represent one of the insurance companies for the next decade, through the last trial. Apparently Gleed, who had no official connection to the Department of Insurance, succeeded in inserting his (naturally) adversarial account of the Hillmon case into the report issued that year by the actual Superintendent,⁵³ Daniel W. Wilder, and then somehow deceived the great Dean Wigmore into believing that the document had a more unbiased origin. (Wigmore acknowledges that his source for the document was “a typewritten copy . . . supplied for use in this work by the courtesy of Mr. Gleed.”)⁵⁴

Gleed was not only attorney for the companies, but also a journalist who claims to have written many of the contemporaneous newspaper accounts of the inquest and the first trial.⁵⁵ He practically made a career of debunking Mrs. Hillmon’s claim, and yet his account has become the principal authority for what we now remember of, and how we think about, the Hillmon case.

THE NEWSPAPERS AND THE HILLMON CASE

The Hillmon case was a sensation, and the Kansas press of that time was never objective in its coverage. But this is not to say that newspaper accounts about trials were indifferent to facts. Indeed, the daily stories in many papers resembled transcripts, with minute, almost question-and-answer, reportage of the testimony. Stories often began with recapitulations of earlier days’ testimony, and these introductions offered the reporter an opportunity for summary, analysis, and opinion. Some of the papers that reported the Hillmon trials were obvious Hillmon partisans, and some (especially the *Leavenworth Times*) obvious allies of the insurance companies.

Newspaper accounts, when factual and not partisan, may be used to fill gaps in official court records. Although portions of the transcripts of the third and sixth trials have been preserved in the records prepared for appeal, these records did not include transcriptions of every witness’s testimony. As for the four inconclusive trials, no official transcripts are available. Moreover, the first three judicial inquiries into the death at Crooked Creek were coroner’s

inquests, and transcripts of their proceedings have not been preserved,⁵⁶ but the third, and most consequential, inquest is reported in extraordinary detail by the *Lawrence Standard*. Many of the witnesses who testified at the six later trials gave testimony at the Lawrence inquest, and some of the jurors later became witnesses in the various trials. In addition, the circumstance that an inquest was held in Lawrence at all, after one had been concluded in the county where the body was found, is not without interest. To begin to understand the Hillmon case, it is necessary to begin with the inquests.

THE INQUESTS AND THE “CALCIUM LIGHT OF TRUTH”

After Brown reported the shooting death at Crooked Creek, two inquests were conducted under the auspices of the coroner at nearby Medicine Lodge, seat of rural Barbour County. The first jury failed to agree whether the death was accident or otherwise (one account says the jury “did not know how to render a verdict,”⁵⁷ an odd circumstance suggesting that homicide, or at least investigations into it, were not common in Barbour County); the second concluded that the shooting was accidental.⁵⁸ The body was then buried at Medicine Lodge, and Brown wrote a letter to Sallie Hillmon explaining what had happened and conveying his regret and condolences.⁵⁹

When the insurance companies that had issued policies on Hillmon’s life learned of the reported death, however, they lost no time moving into action. Agents of two of the companies, Theodore Wiseman (sometimes known by the title of “Major”)⁶⁰ and a C. Tillinghast, traveled to Medicine Lodge and demanded that the body be exhumed for their examination. They were accompanied by one Colonel Walker, apparently a figure of some renown in Kansas.⁶¹ The first two gentlemen told the Medicine Lodge coroner that they knew Hillmon and wanted to assure themselves that the deceased was he. According to a contemporaneous report in *The Medicine Lodge paper*, the *Cresset*, “the identification was satisfactory” and the body, presumptively Hillmon’s, was dispatched “to be returned to his relatives near Lawrence.”⁶² When the body reached Lawrence, however, far from being returned to Sallie Hillmon or any other relative, it was delivered to two physicians, Doctors Stuart and Walker. Described by the *Lawrence Standard* as “representing the insurance companies,” these physicians were reported to be in doubt about whether the body, by then nearly a month

dead and partially decomposed, was that of Hillmon. Three other persons who knew Hillmon were asked to look at the exhumed body, and all said they could not be certain whether or not it was he. Mrs. Hillmon declined at first to examine the body, saying she preferred to remember her husband as he was in life, but later she did look at it.⁶³ The body was then sent to a funeral home to be embalmed, although it was displayed to various persons over the ensuing days.

The next day the coroner of Leavenworth County summoned a coroner's jury and commenced a third inquest, Douglas County Attorney J.W. Green and his assistant George Barker performing the office of examining the witnesses. Early on the *Standard's* reporter took time out from describing the testimony to castigate some cynical observers of the proceedings: "The mistake is made by some, of supposing that the inquest now being held is managed by the representatives of the insurance companies. The inquest is, of course, by the State to determine whether the body brought here is that of Hillmon, and the manner of that death. County Attorney Green and Geo. J. Barker represent the State and not the insurance companies in the examination now being held."⁶⁴

This rather impatient admonition takes on some significance in light of later events. Mr. Charles Gleed's role in representing the insurance companies at the later trials of Mrs. Hillmon's suit against them has been earlier remarked, but the reader will perhaps be surprised to learn that his co-counsel in those trials were J.W. Green and George J. Barker. Barker and Green also represented the companies at the first trial, as well as in both appeals, serving these clients altogether for nearly a quarter of a century. Green, the County Attorney, later became Dean of the University of Kansas School of Law, although he continued to represent the companies in the Hillmon litigation. Whatever their titles and job descriptions at the time of the inquest, these gentlemen certainly ascended later to precisely the roles here disclaimed for them. But it is likely that they were actually employed by the companies even at the time of the inquest. At the fourth trial of the case, in 1895, the Coroner (called as witness by the defendants) testified that he had received his pay for conducting the inquest from the insurance companies, that he believed the witnesses and jurors had been compensated from the same source, and that "as far as he knew the coroner's inquest had not cost the county of Douglas a single dollar."⁶⁵ He also recalled "the fact of the examination of witnesses being conducted by George J. Barker in behalf of the insurance companies and that to this, [the Coroner] offered no

objections.”⁶⁶ Testifying in the same trial, Major Wiseman corroborated this account: he said that he had “employed Mr. Barker at the time of the inquest to assist him in establishing the fact that the body was not Hillmon’s.”⁶⁷

Many witnesses testified, including John Brown, who gave the same account of an accidental shooting that he had given at Medicine Lodge.⁶⁸ Mrs. Hillmon testified that she had looked at the corpse after it was brought to Lawrence and knew it for her husband’s.⁶⁹ Similar testimony about the corpse’s resemblance to Hillmon was given by Levi Baldwin, a cousin of Sallie and erstwhile employer of John Hillmon who had gone to Medicine Lodge and accompanied the body back to Lawrence.⁷⁰ The proprietor of the rooming house where Sallie and John maintained their household also said he had seen the corpse and it was Hillmon.⁷¹ The chief controversies seemed to concern the questions of Hillmon’s height, the condition of his teeth, and the age of a smallpox vaccination scar. (Controversies over these matters—teeth, height, scars—would mark each of the later trials as well.) The corpse was five-eleven, and Hillmon had reported exactly that height when he first applied for the insurance, but the doctor who examined him at the time testified that Hillmon had come back a few days later to say that he was really only five-nine, and that the doctor had then proceeded to measure him and found that the shorter height was correct.⁷² Hillmon had been vaccinated for smallpox just before leaving on his journey, about three and a half weeks before the shooting, and the corpse had a scar from a recent vaccination, but various doctors testified that the scar was too fresh for the body to be Hillmon’s.⁷³ The physicians who had performed the post-mortem of the corpse noted its excellent teeth and one of them, who had examined Hillmon in connection with his policy application, said that by contrast “one or two” of Hillmon’s front teeth were “broken or out.”⁷⁴ Levi Baldwin and the Hillmons’ landlord Arthur Judson, however, said that John Hillmon’s teeth were not defective, and one of the other physicians said he had noticed nothing unusual about Hillmon’s teeth when he examined him.⁷⁵ Two of the physicians also disputed an aspect of John Brown’s account of the shooting: a man shot as the dead man had been would not have staggered before falling, as Brown said Hillmon had, but would, as one of them opined, fall “like a dead weight,” or “quick as sight.”⁷⁶

The reaction from afar to this medical testimony by the writers and editors of the Medicine Lodge *Cresset* (which had earlier reported on the finding of the corpse and the less elaborate coroner’s proceedings in that city) was swift and venomous. Reminding their readers of the earlier events, they wrote:

And now come forward divers and sundry medical experts, versed in the intricacies of insurance swindling, and propose to choke down our throat the monstrous falsehood, that Mrs. Sadie E. Hillman and the man J.H. Brown are accomplices in a matter of selling human life and human blood for money. The legal and medical twisting shows an evident strain on the part of the Insurance departments to establish, by quack doctors, old women and hack drivers, that Hillman was not Hillman, but that some poor unfortunate soul has been sent to eternity, and his body made to do duty as dead man in Hillman's boots.⁷⁷

The *Cresset's* writers speculated that suspicions had attached to the Hillmon death in part because it took place in their rural neighborhood, which they claimed city folk had always regarded as an uncouth wilderness "where the Lion roareth and the Whangdoodle mourneth for its first born."⁷⁸

But back in Lawrence the reporting continued for a time to be less obviously opinionated. When the reporter departed from mere transcription, in the early stages of the trial his analysis was notably evenhanded. He characterized Brown's testimony as "a seeming consistent, fair, and honest story."⁷⁹ He noted the oddity of a man like Hillmon purchasing a large amount of life insurance (apparently the same circumstance that aroused the insurance companies' suspicions), but then conceded that "a man in such circumstances, if he was going into a wild, frontier country, and leaving behind a loved wife, might take that amount and carry it, for a time, at least."⁸⁰ And though he noted the discrepancy between the corpse's length and the five feet nine inches of Hillmon height measured the preceding winter (by the doctor's testimony), asking "does lying in the grave three weeks lengthen a man out in that way?" he also observed that "in many cases death and decomposition work wonderful changes in a human body, so that it cannot be recognized even by longtime friends who have known and loved the form when it was animated with life."⁸¹

John Brown had, in his testimony, mentioned that a third man had traveled with him and Hillmon from a spot "a few miles" out of Wichita to a creek "seven or eight miles" from that city, where the man, whose name they did not learn, camped with them two or three days before joining another party.⁸² He also mentioned that a different stranger had camped with them for one night near (but not at) the fatal Crooked Creek campsite.⁸³ But nobody to this point sought to put a name other than Hillmon's on the corpse, nor was it suggested that either of the traveling companions Brown mentioned might have ended up dead at Crooked Creek.

Apparently some citizens who were following the affair continued to complain that the coroner in Douglas County had no business reopening the question of manner of death after it had been disposed of in Barbour County.⁸⁴ The *Standard's* reporter had no sympathy at all for this opinion:

The attempt to belittle the case is, of course, a failure. A human life was sacrificed under such circumstances that it becomes the duty of the proper authorities to thoroughly investigate the matter. It is known that the Coroner's inquest in Barbour County was a hurried and ignorantly-managed affair.

According to Levi Baldwin's own testimony, the first coroner's jury summoned in Barbour County did not know how to render a verdict, and another was summoned, and after a brief and hasty consideration of the matter, based entirely on Brown's testimony, gave a verdict of accidental killing. Subsequent facts that came to light, rendering it absolutely imperative that the strange and unaccountable performance that caused the death of a citizen of Douglas county (or a purported citizen) should be thoroughly looked into, and every fact connected with it brought to the surface, so that the calcium light of truth may shine in upon what seems to be a cowardly and murderous transaction. If all parties are innocent, no one should object to an investigation, and those who do object to it may find themselves upon the side of thieves and murderers.⁸⁵

Despite the mildness of his earlier reporting, one may mark here the moment where the *Standard's* journalist, as if stung by the sentiments of those who questioned the propriety of the proceedings, changes his tone from curiosity to active hostility toward Sallie Hillmon's claim.

Moreover, at just about this time, this reporter undertook some investigation of his own. He wrote

Before proceeding to a synopsis of today's testimony in the Brown-Hillmon case, which is now attracting very general attention, we desire to say that this reporter called on a lady who had seen Hillmon and particularly noticed his features, and the following conversation took place:

"When did you see Hillmon?"

"Shortly after his marriage, at a social gathering. He played with my baby, and I noticed him particularly, as the man made an unfavorable impression upon me."

"Did you notice any peculiarity of feature about him?"

"I did. His upper lip ran up in the center and displayed his front teeth, and one or two of the teeth were partly broken off or gone. I always notice a person's teeth."⁸⁶

Having delivered this bombshell, the reporter then returned to transcription, reporting the testimony of the rooming house owner (who testified that there was nothing peculiar about Hillmon's mouth or his lips and that he recognized the corpse as Hillmon the minute he saw it).⁸⁷ It does not appear that the lady described in the revelation ever became a witness, although the newspaper's readers could not have failed to note her uncanny prescience about Hillmon's villainy.

There then followed synopses of a number of witnesses who said, in more or less equal number, that Hillmon did or did not have a defective tooth, and then this:

STARTLING DEVELOPMENTS!

Mrs. Lowell, wife of M.L. Lowell of this city, has a brother who left here on the 5th of last March, for Wichita, and to go from there southwest, and return to Independence and Humboldt.

She has not heard of him since he went away, although it was customary for him to write her often. From the description of the dead body brought here she thinks it is her brother, and as we go to press parties are on the way to the cemetery to take up the remains and let her see them.⁸⁸

When word of this report reached Medicine Lodge, the journalists of the *Cresset* remarked: "We would kindly suggest to the lady in question, that she search the Penitentiary, as these silent brothers are more likely to turn up there or on a cottonwood tree, than in the grave of a respectable citizen."⁸⁹ But it seems to have been taken seriously in Lawrence, and represents the first suggestion found in any account of the case concerning a possible alternate identity for the deceased man.

As for Mrs. Lowell, apparently she proved a disappointment to the murder theorists; once the body was dug up again and shown to her she was unable to recognize it as anyone she knew.⁹⁰ The missing brother of Mrs. Lowell was only the first of many persons mooted as the dead man, just as Frederick Adolph Walters was only the last. The same article that reported Mrs. Lowell's anticlimactic discovery informed the reader that "[I]t was reported yesterday that a young man from Indiana saw the body brought here and recognized it as that of a friend who left Indiana some time ago, for Wichita, and has not since

been heard of. Many wild rumors are afloat, but as yet there has been nothing definite learned concerning him.”⁹¹ This young man of Indiana, the second proposed victim of Hillmon and Brown, was never again mentioned. Brown’s departure from Lawrence, however, was the subject of comment.

WHERE IS BROWN?

Brown has not been heard from since he left so mysteriously yesterday morning, nor is his whereabouts known. It was supposed that he went to Wyandotte to visit his family, but such was not the case. Brown should not have been allowed to leave the city until the inquest was closed, especially as such damaging testimony against him had been brought out.⁹²

The reporting suggests a link between Brown’s failure to present himself at the inquest every day and the implications of the testimony, although to this point it is difficult to identify anything “damaging” to Brown that has been adduced. Later testimony at the inquest focused on the question of Brown’s whereabouts, but it revealed nothing sinister: it seemed he had checked out of the place where he had been staying in Lawrence, saying that he was going home to his family in Wyandotte,⁹³ a place less than forty miles away.

The report of the next day’s proceedings began with the proposition that “public opinion is somewhat divided, yet the very general opinion is that the body is not that of Hillmon,” and went on to recount the testimony of a Mrs. McCoy, who said that she was John Hillmon’s sister, and that she had written a letter to Sallie Hillmon asking for an opportunity to see her brother’s body one last time, but had received no reply. Moreover, she said that her brother was less than five feet nine inches tall, had a missing tooth, and a scar on his left hand caused by a firearms accident. When dug up again⁹⁴ the corpse was found to have no manual scars “with the exception of a slight mark on the middle finger.”⁹⁵

The reporter closed this day’s account by noting that “[t]he inquiry ‘Where is Mr. Brown?’ has not been answered,” and then conveying a hint sure to keep his readers’ suspense level high for the next day’s edition:

A small circle of persons interested in the case have been very much agitated all day, and the appearance of things indicate that there are coming developments that will astonish a great many persons. Though a Standard reporter got an inkling of the matter, he was bound over to keep the secret, and nothing can at

present be made known. Suffice it to say there is something now planned to let a flood of light in upon this dark and fearful mystery.⁹⁶

Whatever this coming development may have been, it apparently was not made known to the jury, which rendered its verdict before any other evidence was taken, finding that the deceased was a person “unknown to the jury” who came upon his death “in a felonious manner at the hands of one J.H. Brown.”⁹⁷

The *Lawrence Standard* was unimpressed with the carping of its rival, however. Two months after the coroner’s verdict, having reviewed all of the earlier developments for the reader, the paper then related: “It is stated that Brown sent word from Missouri that he himself did not do the killing as he claimed in his testimony before the coroner’s jury, and that if assured protection he is ready to turn State’s evidence.”⁹⁸ This brief report presaged what became the most helpful turn of events of all for the insurance companies who had insured John Hillmon’s life—the defection (albeit temporary) of Brown from the Hillmon camp to their own. But before returning to Mr. Brown and his behavior after the verdict of the coroner’s jury, we must consider the “something” alluded to by the *Standard*’s reporter toward the end of the inquest, the development that promised to “let a flood of light in upon this dark and fearful mystery.”

THE MAN WHO LEFT WICHITA WITH HILLMON AND BROWN

The day after forecasting this spectacular revelation, the *Standard*’s reporter made another, possibly related, prediction:

It is probable that before too many days some man will be missing whose appearance will correspond to that of the dead body. Or, possibly, the man came from down in the southwest, where men lead a rambling life, and one would not be missed.⁹⁹

The jury returned its verdict on the Monday after this suggestion was printed, but public interest in the case did not abate. Two months later the *Standard* printed not only a recapitulation and analysis of the case, but an account of further discoveries made on behalf of the insurance companies by their trusted agent Major Wiseman, under the headline WHOSE BODY WAS IT?:

Armed with the photographs of Hillmon, Brown, and the dead man, the major went to Wichita and found a number of persons who knew Hillmon and Brown, and who recognized the photograph of the dead man as that of Frank Nichols, sometimes called “Arkansaw.” . . . At Wichita the Major found the baggage of Frank Nichols in pawn for \$18 board bill . . . for the past three years he had lived in the vicinity of Wichita, [where] he boarded at the same hotel that Hillmon and Brown stopped at, and became quite intimate with them. He left Wichita on March 2d and went to Oxford, 35 miles south, to collect some money due for work, stating to some of his friends that he intended to HERD CATTLE FOR HILLMAN AND BROWN¹⁰⁰ at \$20 a month and found, and asked his friends’ advice in regard to this matter. He stated further that Hillman had plenty of money, having showed him a bank book containing records of deposits in a bank in Lawrence of some five thousand dollars. His friends advised him to accept the situation offered, and he told them afterwards that he had, and before leaving Wichita, promised to write them, but up to date, they have never received any letter from him. . . . Certain things that transpired after the three men met near Wellington cannot be related here. Suffice it to say that one of the party left and the other two traveled together. In a lovely place fourteen miles north of Medicine Lodge, the shooting took place. The three men, Brown, Hillman, and Nichols were strangers in Barbour county. The spot where the shooting occurred being about one hundred miles southwest of Wichita.¹⁰¹

The mystery would seem thus to have been solved, except that as the reader knows, this solution leaves no room for the proposition that the dead man was the Iowan Frederick Adolph Walters, author of the McGuffinesque “Dearest Alvina” letter. Nichols was the third, but still not the last, of the men proposed by advocates of the murder theory as the victim of Brown and Hillmon. Note, too, the similarity between the claims made about Nichols and those later made about Walters—that he had encountered Hillmon and Brown and been promised excellent wages to travel with them, had communicated these matters to his friends about the first or second of May, had later accepted Hillmon’s offer, then never been seen or heard from again. Major Wiseman, Colonel Walker, and the insurance companies’ other agents were apparently tireless in their efforts to locate a convincing actor to cast in this role, and the details of their story were already becoming clear, even though they had not by this time ever heard of the cigarmaker from Iowa. In the journalist from Lawrence they had a useful ally.

THE TWO ACCOUNTS OF MR. BROWN

It was mid-May when the coroner's jury returned its verdict of murder "at the hands of John Brown." Curiously, there is no mention of Hillmon in this accusation. Brown must have been feeling alarmed, but the coroner's verdict had no automatic legal consequences and he was not immediately accused, arrested, or charged.¹⁰² Instead, he was approached not long afterward by a lawyer named W.J. Buchan. Buchan had offices at Wyandotte, near the Brown family home to which John Brown had repaired after testifying in the proceedings at Lawrence. The lawyer had several conversations with Brown over the summer, beginning in May, and eventually spoke as well to Brown's brother. In September, Brown signed a lengthy statement in the presence of Buchan and a notary public, and in it he repudiated the story he had told about Hillmon's death and gave quite a different account. The statement averred that John Hillmon and his wife's cousin Levi Baldwin had entered into a conspiracy to commit insurance fraud, Baldwin's part being to pay the premiums and Hillmon's (and Brown's) being to journey to the southwest with the object to "find a subject to pass off as the body of John W. Hillmon, for the purpose of obtaining the insurance money." He said that the first trip the two had taken, in late December, was hoped to produce a discovery of someone who had frozen to death and whose corpse could be passed off as Hillmon's, but when none was found the men went back to Wichita and Hillmon thence to Lawrence. Hillmon came back to Wichita in early March and on their second venture, according to the statement, the two had encountered a stranger "the first day out of Wichita, about two or two and one half miles from town." The stranger "said his name was either Berkley or Burgess, or something that sounded like that," but Brown and Hillmon "always called him Joe." Hillmon told Brown that Joe "would do for a subject to pass off for him," but Brown objected that murder was "something that I had never before thought of, and was beyond my grit entirely." Nevertheless, by the statement's account, Hillmon proceeded with his plan, most foresightedly by persuading "Joe" to allow Hillmon to vaccinate him for smallpox. Hillmon accomplished this rather remarkable feat by taking the virus from his own arm, which was according to Brown "quite bad," and using a pocket knife to insert it into the other man's. Hillmon also persuaded the other man to trade clothing with him, and measures were taken to avoid any passersby seeing three men, rather than two, in the wagon: "sometimes one and then the other would be kept out

of sight.” Apparently as a hedge against any impression of implausibility a reader might form of these events, the statement explains that the stranger was “a sort of an easy-go-long fellow, not suspicious or very attentive to anything.”

The statement then relates that Hillmon shot and killed the stranger at the Crooked Creek campground, put his own day book in the dead man’s coat,¹⁰³ told Brown to ride for assistance, and then vanished north with “Joe’s” valise. Later, back in Lawrence, Brown (according to the statement) had a conversation with Sallie Hillmon in which she assured him that “she knew where Hillmon was, and that he was all right.”¹⁰⁴

A more useful document than this affidavit, from the insurance companies’ point of view, can scarcely be imagined. It accounts for all the facts then known, including the inconvenient vaccination scar, discredits not only Brown’s earlier testimony but two of the most important witnesses (Baldwin and Sallie Hillmon) who identified the corpse as Hillmon, and makes excellent use of what had before been the most suggestive circumstance in favor of the company’s position: the suspiciously large amount of life insurance carried by a poor man like Hillmon.¹⁰⁵

Sallie Hillmon had not yet filed suit on the policies (although she did by then have a lawyer). When Buchan confronted her with the Brown affidavit, in Brown’s presence, she turned to Brown and asked him how he could make such a statement; she also asked Buchan if he thought she did not know her own husband’s body when she saw it. Brown said to her only that he had made the statement and would stand by it.¹⁰⁶

By the time of the first trial of the Hillmon case in 1882, Brown had returned to his original account, testifying for Sallie Hillmon and claiming that Buchan and the insurance companies had pressured him into swearing to the affidavit. But most readers of the Supreme Court opinion, learning of Brown’s inconstancies, will likely have the same reaction that this writer did on first reading: Brown was a weasel and a turncoat, but his affidavit was probably true. For (I reasoned) there could have been many motivations for Brown to lie when he said he had killed Hillmon accidentally, chiefly an expectation that he would share in the insurance proceeds when they were paid. But it seemed unlikely that he had lied in confessing to the plot as he did in the affidavit. Pressure from the insurance companies seemed inadequate to account for that narrative or his willingness to give it, as it would have exposed him to prosecution as an accomplice to murder.

Maccracken's account does hint at a certain complexity that arises from the role of Buchan, the lawyer who persuaded Brown to sign the affidavit. He notes that although the insurance companies always referred to Buchan as Brown's "own attorney," he was paid for his labors by the insurance companies, and that one of the courts involved called his conduct "unprofessional."¹⁰⁷ Maccracken, however, explains Buchan's behavior with the suggestion that "he seems to have thought of himself as an arbitrator."¹⁰⁸ In this sympathetic characterization Maccracken follows Gleed, whose "Annual Report" asserts that "[t]he transaction, as far as Buchan was concerned, became an arbitration, with himself as arbitrator."¹⁰⁹ Gleed also maintains (and Maccracken repeats) that Buchan became involved in the matter only after Brown begged his own father for assistance and the father retained Buchan to represent his son.¹¹⁰ Buchan's actions as described by Maccracken seemed questionable; nevertheless, as a naïve reader I was prepared to accept the historian's forgiving explanation and ascribe my reaction to a (perhaps excessively) nuanced sense of the boundaries of acceptable professional conduct, instilled in me a century later in a far different legal environment. But further reading led me back to Buchan's behavior, and caused me to re-examine my tolerant first conclusion.

The day after the affidavit was signed, another document was executed, this one by an agent of the insurance companies; it "authorized and employed" Buchan to procure and surrender the policies of insurance on the life of John Hillmon.¹¹¹ Buchan himself would testify later that the only pay he received in the matter came from the insurance companies. He bridled at the suggestion that there was anything improper about this, saying that he "was in the habit of taking fees for his work."¹¹²

John Brown testified that Buchan showed up unbidden, not long after the inquest had concluded, at a farm in Missouri where Brown was working; the lawyer came back at least twice more, approaching Brown at places where he was employed and finally at his brother Reuben's house. On the last occasion, at Reuben's, Buchan brought with him a man named Ward, whom he said was a deputy sheriff.¹¹³ On each occasion Buchan pressed Brown to sign a statement saying that the dead man was not Hillmon but another; according to later testimony from Brown, Buchan told Brown he could "make it appear it was a man who came out from Wichita; the man called himself Joe; . . . {and} was killed by Hillmon and me; and was passed off as Hillmon; . . . he asked me what I was doing here, and said they are after you." Brown testified that at Reuben's house,

with the deputy sheriff Ward in tow, Buchan told Brown that “he only asked me to do something to benefit myself, and end the matter . . . said there was a warrant for my arrest, and I must do something soon.” Buchan also informed Brown “that he was employed to protect me; am well acquainted with the insurance men; they care nothing for you, and want to keep from paying the money . . .”¹¹⁴

Reuben, in his testimony at the first trial, seconded his brother’s account. Buchan, he said, had recruited him to go along when the lawyer first went calling on John, saying that the brothers’ father had retained him to look after John’s interests. On that occasion Reuben heard Buchan attempt to persuade Brown to say that the dead man was not Hillmon, and heard his brother refuse. He remembered also Buchan coming to his house some time later with the deputy sheriff, and telling Reuben that his brother was about to be arrested if he did not cooperate and sign a statement that it was not Hillmon who died at Crooked Creek, but that all would be well if John were to sign the statement and then keep out of sight. Reuben explained in his testimony that he had no money to defend John with, and added that Buchan had offered to pay John \$15 for his board (to defray the cost of boarding with Reuben), and in addition to “see the insurance agents and not have the warrant served.” So Reuben undertook to convince his brother that it would be better for him to do as Buchan said, in order to avoid further difficulties, and Brown gave in to these arguments and signed a paper that Buchan had prepared, then swore to it before a notary.¹¹⁵ The notary testified in the second trial that Buchan told Brown not to read the prepared document before he signed it.¹¹⁶ The document’s history then became even more bizarre: after it was shown to Mrs. Hillmon and did not immediately produce the desired effect of prompting her to make a similar confession, it was torn to pieces and thrust into a stove in Buchan’s office. Brown (backed up by Sallie Hillmon) claimed that it was he who treated the paper thus;¹¹⁷ Buchan said he had done it.¹¹⁸ In Brown’s account, the reason for this destructive act was an agreement between the two men that the document was to be used only to be shown to the insurance companies’ men.¹¹⁹ Buchan maintained that the statement was prepared “as a guarantee that Brown would testify in case suit was brought that the statement was true,”¹²⁰ a description that implies the possibility of use in court to impeach a discrepant statement (and of course that is the very use to which the affidavit eventually was put). But Buchan’s account is not compatible with his claim that he tore up the statement and thrust it into the stove; on this point Brown’s story is far more credible.

Whether or not it was not intended for use in a lawsuit, after the stove incident Brown must have believed that the statement had been destroyed. Buchan, however, acknowledged that between the time Brown signed it and the stove incident, he had given a copy of the affidavit to the insurance companies' attorneys for the purpose of having it copied.¹²¹ (Copies were made by hand at the time, so the preparation of a copy was not a casual act.) But he seems even to have anticipated the possibility that a handmade and unsigned copy might not be admissible to the same extent as an original: later he rescued the torn statement from the (evidently unlit) stove, and placed the pieces in an envelope.¹²² Judge Shiras, presiding in the third trial, ruled that the copy made at Buchan's direction could not be admitted or described, and that the matters therein could not be proved unless the original, torn, document were produced.¹²³ Thanks to Buchan's rescue it was produced (apparently restored or at least pieced back together), and admitted into evidence for the impeachment of the man he had claimed was his client.¹²⁴

Although Buchan denied or contradicted many aspects of the Brown brothers' testimony, his own account of the course of his representation is scarcely less damning. He acknowledged that the only pay he received or expected for his work on the Brown matter came from the insurance companies.¹²⁵ In addition to preserving Brown's affidavit after it had been disposed of into a stove, he admitted passing a letter that Brown wrote to Sallie Hillmon (implying that "John" was still alive) on to the insurance companies' lawyers rather than posting it.¹²⁶ He agreed that on one occasion when he had learned of John Brown's whereabouts (from Brown's father, apparently), he took Colonel Walker along when he went to speak with Brown, even though he believed that Walker had a warrant for his "client's" arrest.¹²⁷ It was undisputed that he prepared a document that, in exchange for Brown's affidavit, promised immunity from prosecution for both Brown and Hillmon.¹²⁸ But these negotiations were held only between Brown and representatives of the insurance companies; no public officials signed any of the documents, nor is there any discernible evidence of their involvement. Either Buchan arranged for his "client" to confess to a crime in exchange for a promise that he knew was worthless, or the insurance companies really did dictate the administration of criminal justice in Kansas, and Buchan knew it and was willing to participate in the appropriation of the criminal justice system for their private purposes. Even allowing for the possibility of a less rigorous set of professional expectations in 1880 Kansas than we might

entertain today, the behavior of the lawyer Buchan cannot be extenuated as the work of an “arbitrator.” If the testimony of the Brown brothers is to be believed, his perfidy was shocking; but even if his own account is credited, his persistent persuasions might easily have caused a poor young man to sign a statement that he knew was not true in exchange for assurances that he would face no further trouble if he did so.¹²⁹

If you are not yet persuaded, consider testimony much later by one of the companies’ own faithful agents. The central claim of the affidavit drafted by Buchan for Brown’s signature was that a man who called himself “Joe Berkley” or “Joe Burgess” camped and traveled briefly with Brown and Hillmon, and was later killed at Crooked Creek. In this particular the affidavit capitalized on Brown’s earlier testimony at the inquest that a stranger had been their road companion one leg of the trip (although there Brown said that the stranger had left them before they struck out for Crooked Creek).¹³⁰ But testifying at the last trial, in 1899, Major Wiseman admitted that he had found “Joe Burgess,” the same one mentioned in Brown’s affidavit, quite alive not long after the Lawrence inquest.¹³¹ There was a Joe Burgess, but he was not the same man as Frederick Adolph Walters, and he was not dead. The affidavit was false.

These reflections are important not only to the judgment of history as it pertains to Mr. Buchan, but also to the credibility of Brown and, ultimately, to the significance of the two hearsay letters purporting to be from Frederick Adolph Walters. Without Brown’s affidavit, the defendants had little to rest their case on but claimed variations between Hillmon’s and the dead man’s bodies, the oddness of a man like Hillmon having purchased so much life insurance, and the Walters letters. The letters and the affidavit (despite certain discrepancies between them)¹³² seem to reinforce one another: each tends to quell doubts about the reliability of the other. But if the Brown affidavit is dismissed as the product of the interactions of an unscrupulous lawyer, a relentless set of adversaries, and a frightened and unlettered young man, the Walters evidence justly falls under new scrutiny, together with the famous decision that legitimized it.

THE LETTERS IN THE TRIALS

There was no evidence produced of the letters at the Lawrence inquest, of course, because at that time the insurance companies had not yet learned of Mr. Walters’ disappearance or even of his existence. Instead, it will be

remembered, the defendants proposed various other possible identities for the corpse: the missing brother of Mrs. M.L. Lowell, the “young man of Indiana,” and (after the proceeding was over, in the newspapers) Frank Nichols, also known as “Arkansaw.” But by the time of the first trial the insurance companies had settled on Walters as their main candidate; some of his family members were summoned as witnesses, and some evidence about the letters was admitted.

Judge Foster, presiding in the first trial, admitted the fiancée Alvina Kasten’s letter, together with the deposition in which she identified it; Kasten herself did not testify live at this trial (or any of the others)¹³³ Elizabeth Rieffenach, Walters’ sister, did testify, but she did not mention the letter about which she later displayed such an astonishing and particular memory; she was asked only to examine some exhibit (very likely the Alvina Kasten letter) and affirm that the handwriting on it was her brother’s.¹³⁴

Judge Foster’s summing-up was rather severe about John Brown and his two conflicting accounts, instructing the jury that unless his affidavit was not “voluntarily made,” then Brown must be either a “conspirator to cheat and defraud the insurance companies and in furtherance thereof an accessory to shedding the blood of an innocent man,” or “one who sought to rob the woman whom he had made a widow of her just dues and blacken and traduce the name of her dead husband and his own friend.”¹³⁵ The judge kept the jurors in session overnight on a Saturday, but after seven ballots the jury remained divided seven to five in favor of Mrs. Hillmon, and a mistrial was declared.¹³⁶

In the second trial the Kasten deposition was again received in evidence, together with the letter.¹³⁷ The letter to Mrs. Rieffenach was at this trial mentioned for the first time, but it was not offered as an exhibit because Mrs. Rieffenach maintained that she could no longer find it. She was permitted to testify to the letter’s contents, and did so in such remarkable detail, as though quoting verbatim,¹³⁸ that most students of the case take away the impression that this letter was produced; but it was not. Again the jury hung, this time six to six.¹³⁹

We know the evidence of the letters was important to the second jury because after their inability to reach a unanimous verdict brought the trial to an end, an enterprising reporter interviewed some of the jurors; two of them were willing to disclose what had been the chief points of discussion in the jury room. One juror (who had voted for the plaintiff) suggested to the reporter that if Walters had been in Wichita

he would certainly have been seen and remembered by somebody. He would have had a boarding house; he became a cigarmaker, he would certainly have been remembered by someone of that craft. The fact that there was no attempt to bring anyone forward, who could say they had seen him in Wichita at that time, caused us to believe THAT THERE WAS SOMETHING CROOKED about that letter.¹⁴⁰

Concerning Brown's two accounts, this juror said that they "had considerable influence, although it was hard to tell which of his stories was true," and also that "it will be hard to make me believe but what Buchan worked him pretty hard, to get his evidence for the companies."¹⁴¹

It appears that if Brown's dueling statements are seen to cancel one another out, the letters become important to the jury's deliberations. Yet they must have failed to convince some, possibly because their authenticity was doubted, especially in the absence of any corroboration of the events recited in the letters. The Walters letters thus seem to have operated as tiemakers in the first two Hillmon trials: aware of their contents, the juries divided and could not decide.

Apparently in response to the reported doubts of the interviewed juror, the defendants called, at the third trial in 1888, several witnesses to testify that they had seen Walters, or someone who resembled him, in Wichita in early March, 1879.¹⁴² And again they offered the Kasten deposition, together with its attached copy of the letter she said Walters had sent her, as well as portions of Mrs. Rieffenach's deposition describing her letter.¹⁴³ But this new and revived evidence availed the defendants little because Judge Shiras forbade any mention of the contents of the letters, reasoning that their assertions were hearsay (as no doubt they were).¹⁴⁴ The jury found unanimously for Mrs. Hillmon.¹⁴⁵ The letters, it seems, had been essential to the insurance companies' earlier modest success in staving off a loss; without them they could not prevent a Hillmon victory. Of course it was this outcome that gave rise to review of the case by the Supreme Court, where the Court remanded the matter to be tried yet again before a jury fully apprised of the existence and content of the Walters letters.¹⁴⁶

The three trials that ensued after the Supreme Court's 1892 decision produced outcomes that eerily replicated the first three trials: two more hung juries, followed by a verdict for Mrs. Hillmon destined to be overturned by the United States Supreme Court when the litigation reached it for the second time. But the letters, having by then enjoyed the Supreme Court's attention, sustained a more focused and searching scrutiny in the last three trials than in the first two.

The fourth trial, which took place in Topeka in 1895, was the longest of any—almost three months. On this occasion the insurance companies produced some evidence that no previous jury had heard. Major Wiseman testified for the first time that when the body was exhumed at Medicine Lodge, Levi Baldwin's brother Alva exclaimed, "Hell! That ain't Hillmon."¹⁴⁷ In addition, the defendants called three citizens of Lawrence who had served as jurors at the inquest there; they testified, with remarkable unanimity, that during the inquest Mrs. Hillmon had said that she could not remember or did not know the color of her husband's hair and eyes, nor his height.¹⁴⁸ As no official transcript was preserved of these proceedings, Mrs. Hillmon's lawyers were not in position to impeach this testimony, but this author is: contemporaneous newspaper accounts report that she described the color of his hair and eyes (eyes dark brown, hair brown, whiskers lighter than hair) in addition to many other features of his appearance (dark complexion, sometimes wore chin whiskers and sometimes only a moustache, hair quite straight and tolerably long, cheek bones quite prominent at times, depending on his weight).¹⁴⁹ (It is true that she said she could not certainly state his height, never having measured him.) Two of these jurors also testified that Mrs. Hillmon did not appear affected by the grief one would expect if her husband were dead; one said she was "frivolously good-natured and jovial."¹⁵⁰ But the Lawrence *Standard's* otherwise unsympathetic chronicler of the inquest had reported, to the contrary, that as Sallie Hillmon recounted for the inquest the last letter she had received from her husband, she "appeared considerably affected," and that "her grief, because of his death, has all the appearance of being genuine and heart-felt."¹⁵¹

As for the letters, neither Alvina Kasten nor Elizabeth Reiffenach appeared in person at the fourth trial, but their depositions were admitted. Another sibling, Miss Fannie Walters, testified at length about her brother's appearance and his resemblance to photographs of the corpse taken when it was exhumed at Lawrence, and she did aver that the family had received a final letter from him postmarked Wichita in early March of 1879, but she did not testify to its contents.¹⁵² And the brother C.R. Walters, who lived at the time of Frederick Adolph's disappearance not with the sisters and father in Ft. Madison, but in Missouri, remembered (as he did in the first trial) a letter he said he had received during February of 1879, postmarked Wichita. His memory of this missing letter had grown a bit more particular with time: he said it related that his brother "had made arrangements to drive cattle for a man by the name of Hillmon" in Colorado, and wished to postpone plans

the two brothers had made to meet and go to Leadville for the gold mining until after his engagement with Hillmon.¹⁵³

This brotherly letter (like the one Mrs. Reiffenach claimed) was not produced, but another one was, by Mrs. Hillmon's lawyers: a letter that C.R. Walters had written to the sheriff of Leavenworth in 1880, stating that his brother Frederick Adolph had a gold filling in his teeth.¹⁵⁴ This letter was most inconvenient to the defendants, as their proof had been as adamant on the untouched perfection of the corpse's teeth as on any point in the litigation. C.R. Walters' firm recollection that it was cattle, not sheep, that were the subject of Hillmon's intentions as described in the letter was also a bit of an embarrassment, as the Kasten letter mentioned the woollier species. The jury in this trial hung eleven to one in favor of Mrs. Hillmon.¹⁵⁵

The fifth trial followed the fourth by a year; it began and ended in March of 1896. There were the familiar disagreements about resemblances and disparities between the living Hillmon and the corpse, and evidence of the contradictory accounts given by John Brown. Once again the epistolary productions of Mr. Walters, addressed to Kasten, Rieffenach, and C.R. Walters, became the subject of proof. There was also a rather spectacular witness who was heard in this trial for the first time, a Patrick Heely of St. Louis. Mr. Heeley testified that seventeen years earlier, in the winter of 1879, he had known Frederick Adolph Walters in Wichita—for about two months prior to March 1st, he said. Walters worked for him in Wichita, said Heeley, helping him sell railroad excursion tickets, and the two men had seen each other at least once a day. On about March 1st he said he saw Walters with another man whom Walters introduced as John Hillmon; on a later occasion, he saw Walters alone and Walters said he was going with Hillmon to start a cattle ranch.¹⁵⁶ This testimony in retrospect seems dubious. Heeley was quite certain that his acquaintance with, and employment of, Walters had lasted for at least the two months prior to March 1st, and that he had seen him at least once every day in Wichita during that time; at the sixth trial, however, Elizabeth Rieffenach produced a letter postmarked February 9, 1879 at Emporia (about eighty wintry miles from Wichita) in which her brother writes that he is staying in that city and has not had much employment recently.¹⁵⁷ But this letter was not known to the jurors of the fifth trial. They also hung, a majority of the jurors apparently in favor of the defendants.¹⁵⁸

The sixth trial began in a manner that resembled the others, but offered several significant new revelations. For the first time, Elizabeth Rieffenach produced a

cache of letters that she said had been written home by her brother during the year between his departure from Ft. Madison and the missing Wichita letter.¹⁵⁹ Their purpose was to show that he often signed his letters “FA Walter” (not Walters, the family name); by then Mrs. Hillmon’s lawyers had noticed and pointed out that the Kasten letter was signed in this fashion.¹⁶⁰ It was also claimed to be obvious that the handwriting on these letters matched that of the “Dearest Alvina” letter, a proposition that Mrs. Hillmon’s lawyers did not dispute.¹⁶¹ But this collection is interesting for another reason as well: although the missives suggest that Walters visited Council Bluffs, Kansas City, Warrensburg, Paola, Aladdin, Lawrence, and Emporia, Kansas, as well as Holden, Missouri, during this year,¹⁶² there is no evidence in them that Walters ever stayed or worked in Fort Scott, Wellington, or Arkansas City—the places that the “Joe” of John Brown’s affidavit said he had been working. The tendency of this evidence to disprove that “Joe Burgess” and Frederick Adolph Walters were the same man was reinforced when Major Wiseman confessed that he had found Joe Burgess—the same Joe “of whom there was some talk of [his] having been the body which was shipped back for that of Hillmon”—alive more than twenty years before.¹⁶³

There was a surprise rebuttal witness for the plaintiff, a man named Simmons—his testimony is discussed below. But before that, about midway through the trial, a controversy arose about whether it could continue, occasioned by an attempt to corrupt one of the jurors. One of the jurors communicated to Judge Hook that he had been approached with a “communication . . . which he interpreted as preliminary to an offer to bribe.” The juror had rejected this overture outright, and Judge Hook seemed content to proceed with the trial, but defense counsel immediately moved for a mistrial, and for dismissal of the jurors, insisting that in light of the respective financial positions of the parties, “it would make an impression upon the jury that if anyone had done that, it was the defendants in this case, because the defendants have the money.”¹⁶⁴ The judge declined to interrupt the trial. The jurors deliberated for less than a day before returning a unanimous verdict for Mrs. Hillmon.¹⁶⁵

THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE MCGUFFIN

There is more than enough reason to doubt the authenticity of the famous Walters letters, indeed to doubt whether the Rieffenach letter ever existed at all. Apparently at least some of the jurors thought so as well: the companies never

managed to persuade a unanimous jury of their case, although it would seem that any juror who credited the authenticity and truth of the letters would be nearly compelled to conclude that the dead man was not Hillmon but Walters. Curiously, Mrs. Hillmon's lawyers do not seem to have pursued the possibility that the letters were fakes; there is no doubt of their zealous advocacy but this particular point is not one that appears to have occurred to them. Nevertheless, reasons for doubting the letters' genuineness are numerous.

There are significant incompatibilities between the account in John Brown's affidavit, which was the defendants' most important evidence, and the Kasten letter. In the letter, which was postmarked Wichita on March 2nd, 1879, and begins with the inscription "Wichita, Kansas, Mar 1st 79" the writer states "I will stay here until the fore part of next week & then will leave here to see part of the Country that I never expected to see when I left home as I am going with a man by the name of Hillmon who intends to start a sheep range . . ." ¹⁶⁶ In the affidavit prepared and urged on him by Buchan, John Brown swore that he and Hillmon "overtook a stranger on this trip the first day out from Wichita, about two and one-half miles from town. Who Hillmon invited to get in and ride." According to the affidavit, the stranger said he was named "Berkley, Burgis, or something sounding like that, we always called him Joe," and claimed that he "had been around Fort Scott awhile, and had worked about Wellington and Arkansas City." ¹⁶⁷ This portion of the affidavit is perfectly consistent with the testimony Brown gave at the inquest saying that he and Hillmon had been joined by a stranger during some of their travels.

But in the affidavit "Joe" has become the man who, according to the remainder of the affidavit and the companies' claims, was killed at Crooked Creek and left behind to masquerade as Hillmon's cadaver. If there were such a man, however, it would not have been the man who wrote the "Dearest Alvina" letter. If Frederick Adolph Walters were the "stranger" referred to in Brown's affidavit, perhaps he might have employed an alias., and possibly he might even have claimed to have worked in places that he had not. But another discrepancy cannot be explained away: if the letter writer were Walters, how could he have met up with Hillmon in Wichita, and posted a letter from Wichita thereafter describing this encounter? According to Brown's affidavit, he and Hillmon encountered the stranger two or two and half miles outside of Wichita. If Walters met Hillmon in Wichita, then he was not the man Brown describes in his affidavit, and thus not the man who, according to the affidavit, was murdered at Crooked Creek. ¹⁶⁸

The insurance companies did not know of Walters' existence or disappearance at the time the attorney Buchan persuaded Brown to sign the affidavit. Eventually the insurance companies' men, who were alert to any news of missing young men, learned that the family of Frederick Adolph Walters was looking for their vanished relative. By then it was too late to go back and change the name—Joe Berkley or Burgess—that Buchan had written into the affidavit.

But Walters' disappearance was too suggestive for the defendants not to make use of it, especially after their earlier candidates for the identity of the corpse proved so disappointing. All that was needed to transform it into strong proof that Hillmon had not died at Crooked Creek was a document to tie the vanished man to the Crooked Creek corpse, and a witness to authenticate it. The Kasten letter and Miss Alvina Kasten satisfied this need almost perfectly. If Walters really had met John Hillmon, he would not have been mistaken about when and where. But if a member of the insurance companies' team composed the Kasten letter for the purpose of deceiving a jury, the composer might have overlooked the discrepancy between its contents and the Brown affidavit.

Still, the mind resists this last possibility, because it requires us to conclude that Alvina Kasten lied when she testified, in her deposition, that she had received the letter on March 3, 1879. We must also conclude that Elizabeth Rieffenach never received the lost letter that she testified contained nearly the same information (as did her brother C.R. Walters), and must credit the insurance companies' agents and lawyers with sufficient dishonesty to create a brazenly inauthentic document and suborn the perjury of these witnesses. Can this rather extravagant hypothesis be supported? I believe that it is not only supportable but nearly irresistible, and that a narrative that accounts for all of the known facts must lead us to the conclusion that the Kasten letter was a fake (and that the Rieffenach letter never existed).

We know that the lawyer Buchan, an attorney who conceded that he worked for and was paid by the insurance companies, employed shocking coercion to persuade John Brown to sign the affidavit, a document shown to be false by the later testimony of Major Wiseman.¹⁶⁹ We also know that not long before Alvina Kasten gave her deposition (the only occasion when she ever swore to her receipt of the letter) Buchan dictated to Brown the language of a letter addressed to Sallie Hillmon, suggesting that the writer and the addressee were conspirators in a plot and that John Hillmon was still alive. The circumstance that there was never even any pretense of actually mailing the letter to Mrs. Hillmon—that Buchan sent it directly to the insurance company lawyers¹⁷⁰—

suggests both the nakedness of Buchan's motive for having Brown write it, and the clumsiness of his methods. Mr. Buchan was no stranger to the fabrication of evidence—epistolary evidence—nor was he too scrupulous to pressure an individual into swearing to propositions that were not true.

Neither was Buchan the only attorney in the employ of the companies who participated on the presentation of false evidence. At least three witnesses who testified at the fourth trial—the three jurors from the Lawrence inquest—testified falsely about what Mrs. Hillmon had said at that proceeding.¹⁷¹ The witnesses were examined in these trials by attorneys Green and Barker, both of whom were present at the inquest—indeed conducted it—and surely knew that these witnesses' testimony was untrue. Other testimony presented by the defendants—such as that of the doctor who said that John Hillmon reported his height to be 5'11" (the length of the dead body) when examined for his insurance policy, but came back unbidden a few days later to say he was in fact only 5'9"—is far enough beyond implausible to arouse a serious suspicion of subornation.¹⁷² And it surely reflects on the ethics of the companies' lawyers that they continued to maintain for years after their agent had located "Joe Burgess" alive that he and Frederick Adolph Walters were the same (dead) man.¹⁷³

But if the defendants' lawyers were capable of such chicanery as document fakery and subornation, what would have induced such respectable women as Alvina Kasten and Elizabeth Reiffenach to perjure themselves? Of Kasten more later, but as to Reiffenach, a possible explanation appears in a newspaper account of the second trial. The reporter concludes an account of the day's testimony with the following:

It is not generally known that there was an insurance on the life of young Walters, who is said to have been the dead body taken to Lawrence and passed for the body of Hillman. A reporter for THE TIMES was informed yesterday afternoon that Walters' life was insured and that the insurance money was paid, on the evidence elicited in the Hillman trial, of his death.¹⁷⁴

The *Leavenworth Times* was not sympathetic towards Sallie Hillmon.¹⁷⁵ Probably the report of insurance on Walters' life found its way into print as a way of suggesting that some insurance agent was so convinced that the dead man was Walters that he paid out his company's money on the strength of this conviction. But to this writer the reported circumstance suggests another possibility altogether. The defendants repeatedly argued the unlikelihood that such a man as

John Hillmon would purchase insurance on his worthless life; could Frederick Adolph Walters, an unmarried man and a cigarmaker by trade, have been any likelier to invest in such a cause? Hillmon had a wife to provide for, but Walters had no dependents. But if the defendants wished to induce his sister and other members of the Walters family to testify (as they did) about correspondence from Frederick Adolph that mentioned the name Hillmon, what better method of compensating them for their trouble than retrospectively issuing a policy of insurance on his life, then paying the proceeds to his bereaved family—a gesture splendidly synchronous with their insistence that he had died at Crooked Creek?

Beyond pecuniary motives, however, I believe that the Walters family, or some of its members, did truly come to believe that the photographs of the dead man were those of their lost son and brother Frederick Adolph. A little suggestion and an adroit presentation of the photos would go a long way toward persuading a baffled and worried family whose loved one had suddenly ceased writing that his death by murder was the explanation.¹⁷⁶ Their evident belief that Frederick Adolph had died at Crooked Creek may have pressed the family toward participation in perjury, if they thought it would produce justice for their missing member. C.R. Walters even admitted to this motivation on cross-examination during the last trial, while trying to explain a piece of inconvenient evidence. He had written to the Sheriff Clarke of Douglas County about his missing brother, and mentioned that he thought his brother had fillings in his teeth.¹⁷⁷ This evidence was of course at odds with the insurance companies' persistent claim that the corpse had had perfect, unblemished, unaltered teeth. C.R.'s explanation, elicited on redirect by J.W. Green, was revealing. He said he had been told that Clarke was working for the Hillmon side, and that:

... I had a feeling of vengeance in the matter and was naturally suspicious on all sides, and while I had no sympathy for the insurance companies ... still I had the fear that the murderer would not be brought to terms unless he was brought there by the insurance companies, and that prompted me to make some statements to Mr. Clarke that may not be altogether true.¹⁷⁸

It is obscure why his belief that Clarke was working for Sallie Hillmon would prompt C.R. Walters to misrepresent the perfection of his brother's teeth. But his confession of his desire to see the "murderers" brought to justice, and his belief that it was only the insurance companies that could accomplish this goal, is telling. If he harbored this belief, other members of his family may have done so as well.

Sallie Hillmon's lawyers must have compared the Kasten letter to others, and been convinced that the handwriting was the same. Kasten's deposition was taken in June of 1881, a year before the first trial, in her home town of Ft. Madison, Iowa, and it is this deposition that served thereafter as the defendant's evidence concerning the famous letter. In this deposition she identifies an exhibit (Exhibit "C") as a letter beginning "Dearest Alvina" received by her on the 3rd of March, 1879; she says she recognizes the handwriting as that of her fiancé¹⁷⁹ F.A. Walters, from whom she testified she had received a letter every two weeks, or week and a half, since his departure from Ft. Madison nearly a year earlier. The letter contains the familiar description of his encounter with "a man by the name of Hillmon who intends to start a sheep range" and his intention to accept the man's offer of employment at "more wages than I could make at anything else."

Kasten testified that she had given this letter to Mr. Tillinghast, representing the New York Life Insurance Company, in January of 1880. She said that Tillinghast had come to see her, on the occasion when she gave him the letter, with Daniel Walter, one of Frederick Adolph's brothers. The Walters brother had been there earlier in the month, she said, to show her some pictures of the dead man. She identified only one of them, the side view, as her sweetheart; about the other she said she could not tell.¹⁸⁰

What might have been Miss Alvina Kasten's motives for lying under oath? Perhaps it would have been hard for her to acknowledge that her fiancé had simply chosen not to come home to her, and to stop writing; his death at the hands of Hillmon may have been a less painful explanation for his disappearance. And once recruited to this explanation, perhaps she (like C.R. Walters) was not difficult to enlist in the enterprise of denying the wicked Hillmons the proceeds of their crime, by agreeing that a letter she was shown had actually been received by her shortly after it was dated. She may have been persuaded that the letter was intended for her and had somehow gone astray, but that it would benefit the Hillmons were she truthfully to acknowledge that she had not received it by post. She may also have been promised that she needed only to testify at a deposition and would never have to appear before a judge, for as a resident of Iowa she was not susceptible to the subpoena of a Kansas federal court.

We know Alvina Kasten never did appear in court, which prompts the question, why not? Would it not have behooved the defendants (who

brought in many witnesses from much farther away than Iowa) to persuade the bereaved fiancée to travel to the trial? Yet they did not do so.¹⁸¹ The suggestion that wounded romantic pride might account for a respectable young woman's small bout of perjury may seem fanciful, but consider her testimony that she destroyed all of her correspondence from Adolph—except of course for the letter she had turned over to the insurance companies in 1881.¹⁸² Why? She “was sick at the time and did not expect to get over my sickness and destroyed all my letters.”¹⁸³ Apparently she did not want her letters read in case she died, but this modesty does not comport with her earlier eagerness to surrender the “Dearest Alvina” letter for use in litigation. The destruction of the letters is, however, compatible with some belated doubts about the martyrdom of her swain, although hard evidence of his perfidy would not appear for many years after the young lady gave her deposition.

THE MAN WHO OWNED A CIGAR FACTORY

Consider testimony from the sixth and last trial, in 1899, by one Arthur Simmons. It appears that the defendants may actually have located Mr. Simmons originally, for a pro-defendant newspaper's coverage of the last trial mentions toward the end of the plaintiff's case that it expects testimony from the defendants that “Walters was in Leavenworth in the year 18-8 and that while here worked for the tobacco house of Staiger & Simmons.”¹⁸⁴ But when given, the testimony of Simmons differed from this prediction by a highly significant year, and he was in the end called by the plaintiff as a rebuttal witness. He testified that for three weeks in May of 18-9—that is, two months *after* the death at Crooked Creek—he employed Frederick Adolph Walters in his factory as a cigarmaker. Nor was his testimony the only proof of these events; Simmons produced records of employment corroborating this claim. He knew the young man as F. Walters, and he identified a photograph of the young Frederick Adolph as one of the man who had made cigars for him. He testified that even after the intervening years he had a good recollection of the young cigarmaker because

[h]e was a man who was all the time talking to the men about him and telling of his many travels. He had been in a large number of towns in different places and he also talked a great deal of his love scrapes and how he had gotten out of them.¹⁸⁵

Now perhaps this Arthur Simmons was lying through his teeth and had counterfeited the employment records bearing Walters' name,¹⁸⁶ but short of outright bribery there is no apparent reason why he should have done these things for Mrs. Hillmon or her attorneys.¹⁸⁷ And if Simmons was truthful, his testimony not only directly disproves the insurance companies' claims about the corpse, but also suggests something of Alvina Kasten's place in Mr. Walters' life. It may cast some light on her coyness about whether they were engaged, point to the reasons why he may have left his home and family in Iowa for a more uncertain but freer life, make some sense of her decision to destroy his correspondence, and explain why Walters did not make himself known when the publicity about the Hillmon case reached him.

The *Leavenworth Times* was scornful of the Simmons evidence when it was first presented. The newspaper's trial reporter argued that it would have been impossible, so soon after the notorious death at Crooked Creek, for Walters or his employer Simmons to have been unaware that information about a young man named Walters was being sought in nearby Lawrence in connection with an inquest and the possibility that he might have been a victim of homicide.¹⁸⁸ But this argument represents pure revisionism, because in May of 1879 the name of Walters had not been publicly associated with speculation about the identity of the corpse in the Hillmon case. Indeed, in June of 1879 the Lawrence papers were still speculating that the dead man was Frank Nichols, also known as "Arkansaw." By that time F. Walters had left the employ of Mr. Simmons and moved on. (Simmons said that he employed about twenty-five men at a time and that they "changed often.")¹⁸⁹ Certainly the name of Walters came up at the first trial, in 1882, but Simmons testified that although he remembered the trial he did not attend it.¹⁹⁰

But would not the news that he was thought to be dead have reached Walters himself at some point, especially if he remained nearby? And would not Walters then have made himself known, and by this act relieved the sorrow of those who loved him and mourned his supposed demise? If he was the young man described by Arthur Simmons, an adventurer and traveler and a bit of a rake, maybe not. Perhaps he would have preferred to remain lost, especially if the insurance companies that had placed so much stock in his death were eager to subsidize his adventures away from home. And if this deal were struck, what would have been more sensible than for one of the companies' agents (my money would be on Mr. Buchan) to require Walters for his part to pen a letter, its contents partly dictated, to someone back home?

The letter could then serve as evidence for the companies' propositions about the corpse at Crooked Creek. (The dictation technique was precisely the method employed by Buchan to obtain a letter containing conspiratorial language handwritten by John Brown and addressed to Sallie Hillmon, a document never intended to be mailed but designed to suggest the existence of a plot between the two).¹⁹¹ In such a case, the handwriting similarity between the "Dearest Alvina" letter and the letters later produced by Elizabeth Rieffenach would be no coincidence or forgery; they would indeed have been written by the same hand.

Of course, the letter to Alvina Kasten, having been created some time after the inquest, would have to be supplied with a Wichita postmark of a much earlier date. Although the original cannot be examined, the handwritten copy that remains available for inspection represents that the original was postmarked "Wichita—Mar 2, 1879." (The original envelope, containing the mark, is not in the archive, and apparently spent the years between Alvina Kasten's 1881 deposition and the later trials in the safekeeping of Mr. J.W. Green.)¹⁹² But nineteenth century American postmarks, or cancellations, were neither distinctive nor uniform.¹⁹³ Forging one would not have been much of a challenge, and there is no suggestion that any of Mrs. Hillmon's lawyers scrutinized the cancellation or the letter with any suspicion.

REMAINING MYSTERIES

But even if the matter of the postal cancellation does not pose much difficulty for us, two questions remain to trouble the convictions of those who would believe that John Hillmon died at Crooked Creek. Why would a ranch hand purchase such an extraordinary amount of life insurance (the premiums, it was claimed, were more than his yearly income)?¹⁹⁴ And why did the insurance companies fight this case so bitterly, at such great length and expense, if not because of a principled refusal to capitulate to fraud? The answers cannot be known, but here are some that I think not unlikely.

The Brown affidavit, which was written by Buchan, says that Levi Baldwin's part in the conspiracy was to supply the money for the premiums,¹⁹⁵ and the companies always insisted that Baldwin had invested money in the criminal scheme. Indeed part of their case consisted of the testimony of one of Baldwin's creditors, who claimed that Baldwin had attempted to put off a

payment of a debt by saying that he would soon have \$10,000 from the Hillmon insurance proceeds.¹⁹⁶ Sallie Hillmon never contradicted the claim that Baldwin had supplied some of the premium money. But these circumstances need not suggest that Baldwin and Hillmon had conspired to defraud the companies; it might instead mean that Baldwin, a venturesome fellow by all accounts, thought that a bet against his friend Hillmon's return from a winter sojourn into wild territory, where blinding blizzards or Indian attacks could strike at any time, was a sensible investment. Very possibly Levi Baldwin and John Hillmon had an unwritten side agreement about the disposition of the proceeds in the event John met with a fatal misfortune during his travels: Baldwin would recover a generous return on his investment, but make sure that Sallie was taken care of. Sallie may even have been aware of the agreement. If so, it's not surprising that Baldwin and Sallie Hillmon would not have wanted to acknowledge the side agreement once the matter was in litigation,¹⁹⁷ as it would have been portrayed as (and perhaps was) a devious and ghoulish scheme, and might have given rise to an attempt by the companies to evade payment on the ground that the real party in interest, Baldwin, had no insurable interest in Hillmon's life. But such an agreement would not suggest that John Hillmon intended to commit murder or insurance fraud.

The motivations of the defendants are more difficult to explain—indeed it would be hard to rationalize them no matter who died at Crooked Creek, because the insurance companies must have spent more defending the Hillmon case than they would have had to pay out had they honored Mrs. Hillmon's claim. They eventually settled her claims for nearly forty thousand dollars, all of their investigative and legal expenses constituting losses beyond this amount. Suspicion of fraud very likely did, however, account for the companies' initial refusal to pay the claim.

Fraud was understood by all insurance company executives to be a serious problem for their industry in the second half of the nineteenth century, and many notorious swindles were reportedly accomplished by means that bore a certain resemblance to aspects of the Hillmon affair. The underworld of life insurance fraud had become so colorful and so worrying by the 1870s that it merited extended treatment in a book called *Remarkable Stratagems and Conspiracies: An Authentic Record of Surprising Attempts to Defraud Life Insurance Companies*, by J.B. Lewis and C.C. Bombaugh.¹⁹⁸ Among the cases there recounted is one that arose in Wichita, Kansas, where in 1873 a house

contractor named A.N. Winner is said to have schemed to insure a friend of his named McNutt for \$5000, and then collect the proceeds after faking McNutt's death by fire. But a body was needed for the scheme to succeed, and McNutt apparently confessed to luring a victim from Kansas City to Wichita by promising him a job, and then murdering him in gruesome fashion.¹⁹⁹

One of the decade's most notorious attempts at life insurance fraud was undertaken in Baltimore in 1872 by two confederates, William Udderzook and Winfield Scott Goss. After insuring Goss's life for \$25,000 altogether, through three different companies, the men obtained a corpse from a medical supplier and staged a kerosene lamp explosion after placing the cadaver in Goss's rented house. The burned corpse was claimed to be Goss but the insurance companies refused to pay. One of their main points of suspicion was a claimed disparity between the teeth of the corpse and those of the living Goss. In a reversal of the later dental dispute in Hillmon, the insurers claimed that Goss had strikingly good teeth but that the corpse (whom they arranged to be exhumed a year after burial) had a severely decayed set. Udderzook apparently became alarmed by the vigor of the companies' investigations, which included the widespread circulation of photographs of Goss inquiring whether anyone had seen the living man. He decided that Goss, who was in hiding in New Jersey and had a weakness for liquor, could not be trusted to remain out of sight; so he lured him to some nearby woods and murdered him. Udderzook was hanged for the murder of Goss in 1874.²⁰⁰

One thus can scarcely blame insurance company executives for their suspicions, once the Hillmon death was reported to them. The similarities between its features and certain details of spectacular frauds in their very recent memories were striking: the three insurance policies totaling \$25,000 in Goss-Udderzook, and the Wichita connection and the recent marriage of the alleged deceased and the policy beneficiary in Winner-McNutt.²⁰¹ One of the Hillmon defendants, the Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York, had even been a party to the Goss-Udderzook litigation, which had resulted in a verdict for the purported widow of Goss that was only overturned after Udderzook's murder of Goss led to his conviction.²⁰² Neither is it surprising that the companies' agents used the techniques of demanding exhumation, comparing teeth, and blanketing the countryside with photographic flyers in the Hillmon investigation, as those measures had worked well in earlier, successful, fraud investigations.²⁰³

But although these environmental circumstances might explain the companies' initial suspicions, they cannot account for their adamant

resistance to settling Mrs. Hillmon's claim over the course of nearly a quarter century of expensive litigation. For these reasons, I believe we must look to the professional lives of the local lawyers who represented them, whose advice must surely have guided their clients' decisions.

These lawyers were prominent leaders of the Kansas legal and business community. There was of course James W. Green, the county attorney who became the first Dean of the state's law school, whose interests required the cultivation of the business community. And there was Charles Gleed, author of the report on the case that Wigmore made famous. Gleed was called to the Bar in 1884; the second Hillmon trial was his first important legal engagement.²⁰⁴ The reputation he earned by assisting in this litigation led to his retention by the State of Kansas, in 1885, to represent it in litigation before the United States Supreme Court concerning the constitutionality of state law prohibiting alcoholic beverage production, a remarkable assignment for a young man barely admitted to the practice of law.²⁰⁵ A year later he and his firm (which included his brother) acquired two railroads as clients; later in the decade they represented the telephone company as well as land mortgage companies and eastern interests who invested in western real estate mortgages. During this time many Kansas farmers lost their farms because of crop losses, disastrous weather, and low farm product prices; the law firm prospered by prosecuting foreclosure suits, and advertised itself widely in the eastern states as the best firm to protect eastern investors in Kansas farm property.²⁰⁶ Gleed's biographer observes that "lawyers like the Gleeds were the most fortunate of all the parties who participated in the land mortgage business in Kansas during the 1880s and 1890s. They were able to collect their legal fees in spite of the financial losses being experienced by others."²⁰⁷ The Gleed brothers often opposed actions under consideration by the Kansas Legislature that would have protected farmers against foreclosure, arguing that such legislation would alarm and drive away eastern investors.²⁰⁸

Gleed also served as a Regent of the University of Kansas and several times he toyed with the idea of running for political office. The uniting theme of all of his business and political activity was his conviction that "[m]any of the business enterprises with which he was connected and the prosperity of the state as a whole were dependent upon a continued flow of eastern and European capital unto the West."²⁰⁹ In one of his many public speaking engagements, he sought to alert his fellow citizens to the danger that powerful

eastern interests would withdraw their participation in the state's economy if Kansas could not overcome its reputation as an unsafe and uncivilized outpost.

We are compared to the people of Mexico, and the suggestion is freely offered that we be annexed to that turbulent republic. We are done up in satire, stung all over with barbed wit, and blistered with abuse. We are described as cranks, fad chasers, and political unaccountables generally.

Ours is called the home of the hobby and the land of the ism. It is wondered if we are never to quit "bleeding"—and if our hemorrhage is incurable. It is remembered against us that every social or political opinion ever known since Kansas has been a state has been noisily played with by its disciples, whether few or many. It is flung at us that we have always been puritanical in our opinions, intemperate in our enthusiasms, and violent in our methods.²¹⁰

Gleed eventually became the owner of the *Kansas City Journal*, but his journalistic ethics were assailed over the years by the accusation that he used the newspaper's editorial policy to promote the interests of the Santa Fe Railroad, his client; it was a business whose fortunes he saw as central to the aspirations of Kansas.²¹¹ Gleed was unrepentant about his journalistic biases; his biographer attributes to him the sentiment that "[t]he economic well-being of the nation depended on the ability of capitalists to receive an adequate return on their investments, and it seemed necessary for business leaders to seek to influence public opinion in an era when their interests were being threatened . . ." ²¹² Nearly all of Gleed's business ventures failed, and he died without leaving much of an estate, "an ambitious man who was disappointed by his failure to become a member of the nation's business elite."²¹³

Other lawyers came and went for the Hillmon defendants. In the last two trials Green, Barker, and Eugene Ware, a younger member of the Gleed firm, were joined by Edward Isham of the Chicago law firm Isham, Lincoln, and Beale. Isham, one of whose partners was the son of Abraham Lincoln, was held in such apparent awe that the newspapers referred to him as "Judge" Isham²¹⁴ and reported that he enjoyed "the distinction of having argued more cases in the United States Supreme court than any other attorney in America."²¹⁵ But it is Green and Gleed whose fingerprints are on decisions both tactical and strategic for the defendants. The Hillmon case was, for each of them, the beginning of a career in law and public affairs marked by a commitment to making Kansas safe for industrial and mercantile interests.

In Gleed's case, his enthusiasm for debunking Sallie Hillmon's claim was of a piece with his expressed concern that the eccentricities and antics of his fellow citizens would alienate the powerful interests on whose investments the state's economic growth must depend. Gleed would have fought with every resource he could command to stem any belief in the community of eastern businessmen that their investments in Kansas would be susceptible to loss by fraud. And his defiant stance toward Sallie Hillmon's claim would also have found reinforcement in the culture of railroad accident litigation in the late nineteenth century, to which he would have been introduced as a young man in the law department of the Santa Fe Railroad and throughout the 1880s, while his law firm represented the railroad. One writer described this culture in 1870 as follows:

The policy of railroad companies is generally to discourage . . . suits and make them as expensive and unproductive as possible, in order that other people, in a similar condition, may be deterred from prosecuting them . . .

I think it fair to suggest that the Hillmon case occupied a place of symbolic and emotional significance, and professional pride, for some of the defense lawyers that may have disabled them from giving dispassionate advice to their clients.

As for Sallie Hillmon, by the time the case was over she retained none of the settlement proceeds; before the last trial she had assigned her interest in them to other parties.²¹⁶ Perhaps the decision whether to continue her exhausting quest for affirmation that her husband was no murderer was by then not hers at all.²¹⁷ But of her we do know this one thing: years earlier, before the time when the Supreme Court first heard the Hillmon case and while there was still some prospect that she would collect the judgment she had won, Sallie Hillmon had remarried.²¹⁸ It is possible that an unschooled waitress in her twenties²¹⁹ pulled off a devastating double-cross of her first husband, knowing that he would be compelled to remain hidden while she and her second husband enjoyed their bigamy and his life insurance proceeds. But isn't it far more likely that she always knew the truth of what she had claimed from the first moment she viewed the body that had been brought to Lawrence from Crooked Creek—that John Hillmon was dead?

THE HILLMON CASE ONE HUNDRED FOURTEEN YEARS AFTER²²⁰

I have suggested that the legal rule propounded by the Court in the Hillmon case was created because the only story the Court could bring itself to endorse demanded it. And I have undertaken to persuade my readers that this story was untrue. Only the reader knows whether she has been persuaded.

But suppose I have succeeded; what if I am right? What if the letter from Frederick Adolph Walters to Alvina Kasten was written not when it was dated and postmarked but later, and not because the writer really wished to inform Miss Kasten of his whereabouts and plans, but because some agent of the three insurance companies manufactured this evidence with the assistance of Mr. Walters, who was paid for his contribution? At the very least, if we are persuaded of these propositions, we might be able to look at the exception to the hearsay rule for statements of intention with an eye less deceived by the McGuffin that has always bound this fragment of legal doctrine to a charming but mendacious story. Others have debated the pros and cons of the rule and its variations, but no participant in the debate has questioned the narrative premise that prompted the Court's invention. Surely the discussion would be served by this clearer vision of the origins of and necessity for a hearsay exception admitting statements of the declarant's intentions.

Recent Supreme Court consideration of other hearsay exceptions has cast a severely critical eye on proponents' easy claims about the inherent credibility of certain categories of extrajudicial statement.²²¹ If the justification for the *Hillmon* hearsay exception is the inherent reliability of statements describing the declarant's intentions, those I have persuaded about the Walters letter must look soberly at the statements of Frederick Adolph Walters in the letter to his dearest Alvina, for if I am correct it is full of falsehoods from the implicit assertion contained in the date at the top ("Today is March 1, 1879"), to its assurance to Miss Kasten that "I am about as Anxious to see you as you are to see me," to its recitation of the writer's intentions to look for a place to start a sheep ranch with John Hillmon., who had promised him "more wages than I could make at anything else." One might respond that a single counterexample does not unmake the wisdom of a general rule, but at least the wisdom of the rule must be defended without reference to that particular example. This enterprise is one that the law of evidence, in the one hundred twelve years post-*Hillmon*, has not seriously undertaken.

But even if they do not prompt revision of the law of evidence, these investigations may serve to illustrate the powerful and often unacknowledged contribution of the narrative imperative—the need to construct an acceptable story—to the creation of decisional law. Judges may not think of themselves as storytellers, but this role is not easily abandoned even when disclaimed. Perhaps the maxim *da mihi facta, abo tibi ius* undervalues the other determinants of common-law decisionmaking, but it is a rare narrator who is willing to throw the McGuffin overboard.

Of course, I cannot claim to be immune myself from the seductions of narrative. I have here only told another story, albeit one that I believe to be better justified by the evidence than the understood version. (And of course, my story has the same McGuffin as the Court's—the Dearest Alvina letter—although it plays a different role in the two narratives.) I have tried in telling my version to lash myself to the mast of truth, but I confess I've enjoyed telling what I believe to be an excellent story, and possibly its siren call has deceived me as well. Other investigators may prove me wrong; my sources are available to all.

POSTSCRIPT

It is possible that twenty-first century scientific techniques will make possible a confident identification of the remains buried in the Oak Hill cemetery as Hillmon's or Walters'. On March 31, 2006, I was granted permission by the District Court of Douglas County, Kansas to disinter the corpse from the grave marked "John Wesley Hillman" in the Oak Hill Cemetery in Lawrence. On May 19, 2006, a forensic team headed by my colleague Professor Dennis Van Gerven accomplished the exhumation. The remains were very deteriorated, but we hope that our further investigations of them will result in a definitive identification. In that event we will of course report our findings.

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the Faculty Development Fund of the University of Colorado Law School and aided by the excellent work of Katie Tepley Jackson, Hannah Wanebo, Molly Ferrer, Melissa Kerin, and especially Sarah Hamilton and Andrea Viedt. I thank my law school colleagues from the Colorado Faculty Work-in-Progress Workshop and my friends Susan Appleton, Pierre Schlag, and Hiroshi Motomura for their insightful and useful suggestions.

1. See, e.g., Robert L. Rabin and Stephen D. Sugarman, eds., *Torts Stories* (New York: Foundation Press, 2003); Michael C. Dorf, ed., *Constitutional Law Stories* (New York: Foundation Press, 2004). A more venerable example is John A. Garraty, ed., *Quarrels That Have Shaped The Constitution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).
2. The lady's first name is variously reported, sometimes as Sarah or Sadie, and her last name is sometimes rendered Hillman, but almost all of the original court documents say "Sallie E. Hillmon."
3. See discussion *infra* notes 198–203 and accompanying text.
4. The three suits were *Hillmon v. Mutual Life Insurance Co. of New York*, *Hillmon v. The New York Life Insurance Co.*, and *Hillmon v. Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Co.*, Nos. 3147, 3148, and 3149 in the Circuit Court of the United States in and for the District of Kansas, First Division. Many of the original documents pertaining to this litigation, including Mrs. Hillmon's hand-written complaints, are archived at the National Archives and Records Administration, Central Plains Region, in Kansas City, Missouri. The three cases were eventually consolidated for trial, and for later argument on appeal to the United States Supreme Court, which decided the appeals in *Mutual Life Insurance Co. of New York v. Hillmon*, 145 U.S. 285 (1892).
5. The most popular, and most relied-upon, account is Brooks W. MacCracken, "The Case of the Anonymous Corpse," XIX *American Heritage* 50 (June 1968) (hereinafter McCracken). As will be seen, however, MacCracken overlooked quite a bit.
6. For example, many purport to consider the *res gestae* exception to the hearsay rule, a doctrine notorious for its vacuity. See cases collected in Morgan, "The Law of Evidence," 1941–45, 59 *Harvard Law Review* 481 (1946).
7. A McGuffin, in a film or narrative, is a "thing . . . which appears to the characters and the audience to be of great significance but is actually only an excuse for the plot," or "a thing . . . which misleads the characters and the audience." Lesley Brown, ed., *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 4th edition, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). Some credit Alfred Hitchcock with the invention of the term, and the use of the concept in many of his films.
8. The case was also retried three times after the 1892 decision, resulting in two more hung juries, one more verdict for Mrs. Hillmon, and one more reversal of that victory by the Court, in 1903.
9. See "What She Says," *Topeka Capital*, Mar. 6, 1888, at 2 (John Eldridge, Sallie Hillmon); "A Verdict at Last," *Topeka Capital*, Mar. 22, 1888, at 4 (Judge's summing up refers to several other witnesses).
10. Brown's original account, given at an inquest, is reported in the "The Hillman Horror," *Lawrence Standard*, Apr. 10, 1879, at 1–2. For portions of Brown's pretrial deposition, which was taken over a period of weeks in December of 1881 and January and February of 1882, see Transcript of Record, Supreme Court of the United States, *The Mutual Life Insurance Co. of New York, The New York Life Insurance Company, and the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company of Hartford, Connecticut (Consolidated), Plaintiffs in Error, vs. Sallie E. Hillmon*, at 162, filed Oct. 8, 1888 [hereinafter 1888 Transcript]. A transcript of the entire deposition may be found in the record of the second appeal. Transcript of Record, Supreme Court of the United States, *Conn. Mutual Life Insurance Co. v. S.H. Hillmon*, No. 94 (1903), filed Oct. 1899, at 342 [hereinafter 1899 Transcript].
11. "The Hillman Case," *Topeka Daily Commonwealth*, Mar. 7, 1888, at 8; "The Hillman Case," *Topeka Daily Commonwealth*, Mar. 8, 1888, at 8; "The Hillman Trial," *Topeka Daily Commonwealth*, Mar. 9, 1888, at 8; "Contests in the Courts," *Topeka Daily Commonwealth*, Mar. 13, 1888, at 8.

12. Brown appeared as a witness only in the first trial, and thereafter became unavailable, so in the 1888 proceeding his statements in support of the plaintiff took the form of a transcript of his pretrial deposition, which he had given after returning to his original story about the accidental death of Hillmon. Those offered by the defendant companies, containing the “Joe” version of his account, appeared in the written affidavit Brown had signed at the urging of the companies’ agents. See Aff., John H. Brown, 1888 transcript, *supra* note 10 at 163 [hereinafter Brown Affidavit].
13. “The Hillman Trial,” *Topeka Daily Commonwealth*, Mar. 14, 1888, at 3. These identifications were made from photographs taken of the corpse about a month after its demise.—probably it was somewhat the worse for wear, having been exhumed, autopsied, displayed to the public, buried, and exhumed again during those weeks.
14. “A Verdict at Last,” *Topeka Capital*, Mar. 22, 1888, at 4 (judge’s summing-up).
15. See 1888 Transcript, *supra* note 10 at 189 (Rieffenach deposition), 190–91 (Kasten deposition).
16. “More Mystery,” *Leavenworth Times*, June 28, 1882, at 1 (she is identified as Elvira D. Caston)
17. See, e.g., “The Hillman Case,” *Leavenworth Times*, June 19, 1885, at 1 (second trial), in which it is reported that “Mrs. Elizabeth Reivnoeck,” sister of the missing man, “repeated this letter almost verbatim.” The Supreme Court’s 1992 opinion reproduces Mrs. Rieffenach’s recitation of the letter. *Mut. Life Ins. Co. of New York v. Hillmon*, 145 U.S. 285, 288 (1892).
18. See 1888 Transcript, *supra* note 10 at 190.
19. *Id.*, at 190 (Kasten letter), 189–90 (Rieffenach testimony).
20. *Mut. Life Ins. Co. of New York*, 145 U.S. at 295–96, quoting *Ins. Co. v. Mosley*, 8 Wall. 397, 404–05 (1869).
21. There is a hint of this notion in the Court’s observation about intentions “important only as qualifying an act.” Words of gift, for example, must be accompanied by delivery to effectuate the gift.
22. See Christopher B. Mueller and Laird C. Kirkpatrick, *Evidence* § 8.16, 3rd edition (St. Paul: Thomson/West, 2004).
23. *Mut. Life Ins. Co. of New York*, 145 U.S. at 296, quoting *Ins. Co. v. Mosley*, 8 Wall. 397, 404–05 (1869).
24. See Fed. R. Evid. 804(b)(2) advisory committee’s note.
25. See Fed. R. Evid. 804(b)(3) advisory committee’s note.
26. Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations describes this admonition as “an ancient proverb, sometimes attributed to Homer.” *John Bartlett, Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* 235 n.1, 16th edition (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992).
27. See *infra* note 32.
28. Since the three cases had been consolidated for trial, Judge Shiras had allocated the statutory three challenges to the defendants jointly, and had denied them any further strikes after each had excused one juror. The statute authorized this method of allocating peremptory challenges in cases “where there are several defendants,” but the Court held that it was improper to employ it when separate cases against different defendants had been consolidated. *Mut. Life Ins. Co. of New York v. Hillmon*, 145 U.S. 285, 294 (1892).
29. See Petition in Error, 1888 Transcript, *supra* note 10 at 90–101.
30. *Mut. Life Ins. Co. of New York*, 145 U.S. at 294.
31. Thayer’s notes are quoted in John MacArthur Maguire, “The Hillmon Case—Thirty Three Years After,” 38 *Harvard Law Review* 709 (1925). Professor Maguire does not explain how he happened to have access to Thayer’s teaching notes.
32. It is obscure what these general principles may have been, but a cryptic comment in Thayer’s notes here suggests that in conference one member, possibly Justice Henry B. Brown, remarked that the case seemed to be one of “graveyard insurance.” *Id.* at 711, n. 11. The meaning of this dismissive characterization is murky, but at about the time of the *Hillmon* decision it seems to have found popular use to describe various insurance frauds. Investigators of the time employed the term to characterize a common scheme in which an individual or syndicate purchased insurance on the life of an ill or doddering soul, then encouraged the insured to indulge his unhealthy habits or take risks with his life; sometimes the scheme went so far as to encompass murder. See J.B. Lewis and C.C. Bombaugh, *Stratagems and Conspiracies to Defraud Life Insurance Companies: An Authentic Record of Remarkable*

- Cases* 53 (New York, G.W. Carleton, 1896) (describing the practice as a “graveyard epidemic”) [hereinafter *Remarkable Stratagems*]. For more about this unusual book, see *infra* notes 198–99 and accompanying text.
33. See Maguire, *supra* note 31 at 711–712.
 34. Jan M. van Dunné, “Normative and Narrative Coherence in Legal Decision Making” in *Law and Legal Interpretation*, Fernando Atria and D. Neil MacCormick, eds. (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate/Dartmouth, 2003), p. 409.
 35. See, e.g., *id.*; Robin West, “Jurisprudence as Narrative: An Aesthetic Analysis of Modern Legal Theory”, 60 *New U. L. Rev.* 145, 159 (1985); Richard Weisberg, *Poethics and Other Strategies of Law and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press 1992); Jonathan Yovell, “Invisible Precedents: On the Many Lives of Legal Stories Through Law and Popular Culture,” 50 *Emory Law Journal* 1265 (2001).
 36. See West, *supra* note 35 at 159.
 37. See Brendan F. Brown, *The Natural Law Reader* (New York: Oceana, 1960), p. 113.
 38. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p.195, quoted in West, *supra* note 35 at 48.
 39. *Id.*, at 187–88 (1957), quoted in West, *supra* note 40 at 48. These tropes recur continually in the narratives urged by the defendants on the serial juries that heard the Hillmon case—the youth and purity of their surrogate Walters as contrasted with the age, experience, and corruption of Hillmon. This was so especially concerning teeth and scars: Hillmon’s teeth were often described (by defendants’ witnesses) as rotten, his body as scarred.
 40. See West, *supra* note 35 at 159.
 41. British literary historian David Watson Rannie, in a slender 1895 book, proposed that letters as a literary form were distinguished from essays and autobiography by their candor and artlessness, in part because they were not intended for publication. David Watson Rannie, *Letter Writing as a form of Literature in Ancient and Modern Times* (Oxford: B.H. Blackwell 1895), p. A2, (“the world will never pry into the dual solitude in which [the letter] has its being”).
 42. See Yovell, *supra* note 35.
 43. See Maguire, *supra* note 31; Eustace Seligman, “An Exception to the Hearsay Rule,” 26 *Harvard Law Review* 146 (1913); James W. Payne, Jr., “The Hillmon Case—An Old Problem Revisited,” 41 *Virginia Law Review* 1011 (1955).
 44. Fed. R. Evid. 803(3) advisory committee’s note (emphasis added).
 45. For example, in the advisory committee’s note after Fed. R. Evid. 804(b)(3), the Committee rejected the rule of *Donnelly v. United States*, 228 U.S. 243 (1913) (statement against penal interest is not an exception to the hearsay rule, even if declarant is unavailable).
 46. See Maguire, *supra* note 31.
 47. Annual Report of the Kansas State Superintendent of Insurance, reproduced in John H. Wigmore, *The Principles of Judicial Proof* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1913), pp. 856–896 [hereinafter Annual Report].
 48. See Maccracken, *supra* note 5 at 50.
 49. *Id.*, at 75.
 50. Maccracken is not alone in harboring little skepticism of this report or its source. A British scholar who investigated the case opines that “no impartial reader can fail to be persuaded by the account of the facts retailed by Wigmore that the body presented was not that of Hillmon, but that of one Walters.” Colin Tapper, “Hillmon Rediscovered and Lord St. Leonards Resurrected,” 106 *L.Q.Rev.* 441, 459–60 (1990). Professor Tapper concedes that Wigmore’s account was “taken from a report by a Kansas State Insurance Commissioner who . . . admittedly [represented] the defendants,” but credits the author as “meticulous in separating fact from opinion.” *Id.*, at 72. Wigmore’s account is in fact nothing but a verbatim replication of the “Superintendent’s Report.”
 51. Wigmore gives the date of the report as 1887, but this cannot be correct, as the report says on its first page, “The cases are now (April 1888) in the Circuit Court pending the argument of a motion for new

- trial. If this motion is overruled, an appeal will probably be taken to the United States Supreme Court.” (parenthetical material in original). See Annual Report, *supra* note 47, at 856–896.
52. *Id.*, at 856 (Gleed lists himself as attorney for defendants on both second and third trials); see also *id.*, at 884–87 (Gleed quotes at length from his own closing argument).
 53. See *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Insurance of the State of Kansas for the Year Ending December 31, 1887* (Topeka, Kansas Publishing House: Clifford C. Baker, State Printer, 1888), pp. 49–74. The report, otherwise a rather dry compendium of statistics and encomia, contains only one other similar narrative, an account of a dispute over whether the daughter of Nannie C. Poinsett ought to be barred from receiving the proceeds of insurance on her mother’s life because she had poisoned the lady with arsenic. The attorneys for the insurance companies in that dispute, which was tried only once and resulted in a verdict for the daughter, included Barker, Green, and Gleed, but the account of it was not written by any of the attorneys. The narrator, one Charles M. Foster (connection to the matter undisclosed), relates that one witness changed his testimony, and then changed it back again, claiming at one point that he had been pressured by attorneys for the Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York—one of whom was J.W. Green, but another of whom was C.W. Hutchings, who was still at that time and for many years thereafter attorney for Sallie Hillmon in her suit against the same company.
 54. John H. Wigmore, *The Principles of Judicial Proof* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1913), p. 856.
 55. See Annual Report, *supra* note 47 at 857.
 56. See “Photograph Palaver,” *Leavenworth Times*, June 27, 1882, at 1 (first trial) (George Baldridge testifies that he took a stenographic record of the inquest at the request of Maj. Wiseman, but “never furnished either the coroner or county clerk a copy of the testimony.”)
 57. See “The Hillman Horror,” *supra* note 10 at 1 (testimony of Levi Baldwin).
 58. *Id.*, at 2; see also “The Hillmon Cases,” *Leavenworth Times*, June 16, 1882, at 1.
 59. “A Long Story,” *Leavenworth Times*, June 17, 1882, at 1.
 60. Major Wiseman continued to be a useful agent for the companies throughout the next two decades of the Hillmon litigation. He described his commission as “looking up evidence to prove that the body was not Hillmon.” “How Tall was He?” *Topeka Daily Capital*, Mar. 18, 1896, at 2. He had to confess with some rue, at the fifth trial, that he had gone unpaid and had been required to sue his employers for the \$2500 they owed him for his services. *Id.* But he may have had his revenge for this mistreatment. See *infra* note 131.
 61. *Medicine Lodge Cresset*, Apr. 3, 1879, at 2. This story remarks, of Colonel Walker, “The Col.’s fame in early Kansas history is too well known to need any comment.”
 62. *Id.* At later proceedings, Major Wiseman and Mr. Tillingast would testify that they knew and said, immediately on seeing the body, that it was not Hillmon’s. See “How Tall was He?,” *supra* note 60 at 2 (testimony of Major Wiseman). But this was not the *Cresset* reporter’s impression.
 63. She later said that the insurance company’s men discouraged her from viewing the corpse; they denied that they had, but another witness who had been with her on the occasion confirmed her account. See “Coming to a Close,” *Leavenworth Times*, June 30, 1882, at 4 (testimony of Mrs. Judson).
 64. See “The Hillman Horror,” *supra* note 10 at 1.
 65. “The Hillman Trial,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, Feb. 16, 1895, at 6.
 66. *Id.*, at 6.
 67. “Wiseman Testifies,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, Jan. 31, 1895, at 4.
 68. *Id.*, at 2.
 69. *Id.*
 70. *Id.*
 71. *Id.*
 72. *Id.*
 73. *Id.*
 74. *Id.*

75. *Id.*
76. *Id.*
77. “Hillman Tragedy,” *Medicine Lodge Cresset*, Apr. 17, 1879, at 2.
78. *Id.*
79. See “The Hillman Horror,” *supra* note 10 at 1.
80. *Id.*
81. *Id.*
82. *Id.*
83. *Id.*
84. Another Lawrence newspaper had reported that, although not opposed to the inquiry “the people—very many of them—do object to having the EXPENSE foisted off upon DOUGLAS COUNTY. The proceedings here are instituted, we understand, by the Insurance companies who have \$25,000 at stake, and it is claimed to be simply a matter of justice that they should foot the bills, instead of our overburdened taxpayers.” “The Hillman Inquest,” *Lawrence Daily Tribune*, April 7, 1879, at 4. The taxpayers needn’t have worried; as it turned out the companies were willing to pay everyone, including the witnesses and jurors. See “Wiseman Testifies,” *supra* note 67 at 4. And this gesture seemed to quell the objections of the Tribune’s editors, as they suggested a few days later that citizen curiosity about the verdict of the coroner’s jury was “unseemly” as “[i]t is a private matter and hence we have no right to be too inquisitive; we do not pay the bills; we do not encourage or justify the official action; we have no right to ask any questions.” *Id.*, at 4.
85. See “The Hillman Horror,” *supra* note 10 at 2. The colorful juxtaposition of calcium light (a sort of stage light or spotlight) and truth appears also in the otherwise very different coverage of the Medicine Lodge newspaper, which proposes that the “light of calcium truth be permitted to shine through the dark and infamous swindle which the Insurance companies propose to so coolly carry out.” See “Hillman Tragedy,” *supra* note 77 at 2.
86. See “The Hillman Horror,” *supra* note 10 at 2.
87. *Id.*
88. *Id.* Has any corpse outside of horror fiction ever suffered more difficulty remaining in its grave?
89. See “Hillman Tragedy,” *supra* note 77 at 2.
90. “Murder Will Out!,” *Lawrence Standard*, Apr. 17, 1879, at 4.
91. *Id.*
92. *Id.*
93. *Id.* (Testimony of G.A. Stevens, Mrs. Turner Sampson, and Kitty C. Howe).
94. See *supra* note 88 and accompanying text.
95. See “Murder Will Out!” *supra* note 90 at 4.
96. *Id.*
97. *Id.*
98. “The Hillman Tragedy,” *Lawrence Standard*, June 26, 1879, at 4.
99. See “Murder Will Out!” *supra* note 90 at 4. On April 11, the other Lawrence newspaper reported a “rumor” that “the body of the supposed Hillmon may prove to that of a man named Willey, who had been with Hillmon and Brown a great deal. His home is in Illinois and he was last heard of some sixty miles southwest of Wichita, about six weeks ago.” “A Rumor,” *Lawrence Daily Tribune*, Apr. 11, 1879, at 4. Willey’s name does not seem to come up again, however.
100. This phrase is displayed in the newspaper column in the manner shown.
101. See “The Hillman Tragedy,” *supra* note 98 at 4.
102. Much later the coroner testified that he had issued a warrant for Brown’s arrest after the jury returned its verdict, and that Mr. Green had assisted in its preparation. See “The Hillmon Trial,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, Feb. 16, 1895, at 6. But none of the contemporaneous reporting mentions this fact, and Green himself, called as a witness twenty years later at the sixth trial, denied that he had ever issued a warrant for Brown. . “Advised His Brother to Swear to a Lie,” *Leavenworth Times*, Oct. 24, 1899, at 4.

103. Hillmon's daybook or journal, a surprisingly literate document that says nothing about any plans to kill a man (of course it wouldn't, no matter whom you believe) was found on the body at Crooked Creek. See Annual Report, *supra* note 47 at 857–59.
104. See Brown affidavit, *supra* note 12 at 165.
105. Brown also wrote (not just signed, as with the affidavit) another highly helpful document: a letter to Sallie Hillmon. He later would say that the letter was dictated to him by Buchan. "How It Happened," *Leavenworth Times*, June 20, 1882, at 1. The letter said: "I would like to know where John is, and how that business is, and what I should do, if anything. Let me know through my father. Yours truly, John H. Brown." But Mrs. Hillmon testified that she did not receive this letter, *Leavenworth Times*, June 11, 1885, at 4, and Buchan admitted that he did not send it on to her, See "How it Happened," *supra* note 105 at 1; instead he gave it to the insurance companies' representatives. Apparently it was never intended as an actual communication; it was a piece of evidence manufactured by Buchan, at a time he purported to be representing Brown, in favor of the insurance companies' theory that Brown and Sallie Hillmon were united in a continuing conspiracy.
106. This was Brown's testimony at the first trial (the only one at which he appeared in person). "Brown's Letter," *Leavenworth Times*, June 18, 1882, at 5. In addition, it was Mrs. Hillmon's consistent account. See "How it Happened," *supra* note 105 at 1.
107. See Maccracken, *supra* note 5 at 53.
108. *Id.*, at 53, 73.
109. See Annual Report, *supra* note 47 at 873.
110. *Id.*, at 870; Maccracken, *supra* note 5 at 53. Certainly this was Buchan's claim, but the elder Brown was never called to testify, by either side. The brothers Brown maintained that Buchan had approached John Brown without invitation or authority.
111. *Id.*
112. "Proceedings Before Judges Foster and Brewer—The Hillman Case," *Leavenworth Times*, June 14, 1885, at 4 (second trial).
113. "A Long Story," *Leavenworth Times*, June 17, 1882, at 1. Buchan acknowledged that the deputy accompanied him on the drive over to Reuben Brown's place, but testified that his companion's law enforcement credentials were mere coincidence; the sheriff's office just happened to have the best team of horses around, and "little use for it." "That Tooth," *Leavenworth Times*, June 22, 1882, at 1.
114. See "A Long Story," *supra* note 113 at 1.
115. See "How it Happened," *supra* note 105.
116. "The Hillman Case Still Going On," *Leavenworth Times*, June 12, 1885, at 4 (second trial). In the 1988 trial Buchan agreed that "Brown did not read [the affidavit] over." "Hillman the Murderer," *Lawrence Tribune*, Mar. 16, 1888, at 2.
117. See "A Long Story," *supra* note 113 at 1 (John Brown); "How It Happened," *Leavenworth Times*, June 20, 1879, at 1 (Sallie Hillmon).
118. See "That Tooth," *supra* note 113 at 1.
119. See "A Long Story," *supra* note 113 at 1. (first trial). He seemed willing by his account, however, to have it shown to Sallie Hillmon as an inducement to abandon her claims.
120. See "That Tooth," *supra* note 113 at 1.
121. *Id.*
122. "Vaccine Virus," *Leavenworth Times*, June 23, 1882, at 1 (testimony of J.R. Buchan).
123. See 1899 Transcript, *supra* note 10 at 166–67. See also "The Hillman Case," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Mar. 2, 1888, at 4.
124. *Id.*
125. See "That Tooth," *supra* note 113 at 1.
126. "Brown's Confession," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Mar. 10, 1888, at 4 (second trial). See *Supra* n.105.
127. *Id.*

128. *Id.* Buchan testified that Brown's insistence on immunity not only for himself but for his partner as well complicated the negotiations, and of course if true this would suggest that Brown knew Hillmon was still alive; but Brown's testimony was different.
129. Brown's deposition describes Buchan's importunings thus: "[B]y me consenting to do this would insure me that I would never have any trouble about it from that time on, and if I didn't the insurance men would hunt me down and penitentiary me for murder, and that they had plenty of money, and never calculated to paying the woman her money, and it would enable him to get big pay for this paper, and that if I needed any money or anything he would give me all I wanted." See Brown Deposition, in 1899 Transcript, *supra* note 10 at 401 (hereinafter Brown deposition).
130. Brown's deposition testimony claimed that "After I told him [Buchan] of this man that camped with us at Cow Skin, then he said he could make it appear that this man was killed instead of Hillmon, and stated in his paper [the affidavit] to this effect." *Id.*, at 401.
131. "Brother and Sister Swear It Was Walters," *Leavenworth Times*, Nov. 11, 1899, at 6. Apparently, by the end of the last trial the defendants had more or less given up the claim that Frederick Adolph Walters was the "Joe Burgess" of Browns' affidavit. One of their own attorneys elicited from Major Wiseman that he had "found" both Francis (Frank) Nichols and Joe Burgess in 1879. *Id.* But perhaps they knew that if they did not bring out this fact, plaintiff's counsel would have. Wiseman's belated willingness to help Sallie Hillmon may have been connected to his testimony in the fifth trial that the companies had not paid him for his services and he had been required to sue them. See "How Tall Was He," *supra* note 60 at 2.
132. See *infra* note 166–68 and accompanying text.
133. "Was It Walters?," *Leavenworth Times*, June 29, 1882, at 4.
134. *Id.*
135. "Foster's Findings," *Leavenworth Times*, July 2, 1882, at 5.
136. "The Hillmon Cases," *Leavenworth Times*, July 4, 1882, at 2.
137. "Proceedings Before Judges Brewer and Foster—the Hillman Case," *Leavenworth Times*, June 18, 1885, at 4.
138. "The Hillman Case," *Leavenworth Times*, June 19, 1885, at 1. The press account spells her surname "Reivnoeck."
139. "The Hillman Trial," *Leavenworth Times*, June 25, 1885, at 4.
140. *Id.* (capitalization in original).
141. *Id.*
142. See "Was It Walters?," *supra* note 133 at 4.
143. *Id.*, at 4; 1888 Transcript, *supra* note 10 at 190–91. Rieffenach did not appear in person at this trial. Her deposition was taken in 1880. See 1899 Transcript, *supra* note 10 at 1778.
144. See 1888 Transcript, *supra* note 10 at 189–90.
145. "A Verdict at Last," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Mar. 22, 1888, at 4.
146. See *supra* notes 20–23 and accompanying text.
147. "The Hillmon Case," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Feb. 1, 1895, at 8. The blow-by-blow accounts of the inquest and accompanying events in Lawrence by a reporter who obviously favored the insurance companies made no mention of this event in 1879, although it seems that it would have been well-remarked at the time had it happened. When Alva Baldwin finally appeared as a live witness, at the sixth trial, he firmly denied having made the exclamation. "Mysterious Silence of Alva Baldwin Broken," *Leavenworth Times*, Oct. 26, 1899, at 4.
148. See "The Hillmon Case," *supra* note 147 at 5; "Hillmon Trial Again Resumed," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Feb. 6, 1895, at 4.
149. *Leavenworth Standard*, Apr. 10, 1879 at 1.
150. "Say It Was Not J.W. Hillmon," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Feb. 2, 1895, at 5; See "Hillmon Trial Again Resumed," *supra* note 148 at 4.

151. See "The Hillman Horror," *supra* note 10 at 1.
152. "Walters' Sister," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Feb. 24, 1895, at 2.
153. "Goes Right Along," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Feb. 23, 1895, at 5.
154. *Id.*
155. "Eleven to One," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Mar. 21, 1895, at 6.
156. *Id.*, at 5.
157. See 1899 Transcript, *supra* note 10 at 1794.
158. "Same Old Result," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Apr. 4, 1896, at 1. The *Capital* reported that the last poll taken of the jurors was seven to five, although one juror later claimed they had been evenly divided. It also reported that the jurors had thereafter agreed to some sort of numerical system to calculate the weight of evidence on each side by assigning a value from zero to five for each witness. On this system, the *Capital's* source said, the insurance companies were far ahead until one holdout juror refused to vote according to this system, and this defection caused the foreman to inform the judge that they were at an impasse. The paper also reported that the insurance companies had proposed to the Hillmon side, after this outcome, to "try the case before the five federal judges who have tried the case and abide by the decision of the majority." *Id.* This proposal did not, it seems, meet with agreement.
159. See 1899 Transcript, *supra* note 10 at 1790–94.
160. See "Brother and Sister Swear It Was Walters," *supra* note 131 at 6.
161. J.W. Green explicitly noted the plaintiff's failure to contest the identity of the handwriting in his summation. "Simmons Testimony a Footless Fancy," *Leavenworth Times*, Nov. 17, 1899, at 4.
162. This itinerary is remarkably similar to the list of cities given by Miss Alvina Kasten when she was asked in her deposition from whence she had received letters from Walters. See 1899 Transcript, *supra* note 10 at 1693. These letters were never produced because (Kasten said) she had destroyed all of Walters' letters except for the crucial one. See *infra* note 183 and accompanying text.
163. See "Brother and Sister Swear It Was Walters," *supra* note 131 and accompanying text.
164. Typewritten partial transcript of 1899 trial, page marked 668 (NARA Archive).
165. "Gives Her \$33,102," *Leavenworth Times*, Nov. 19, 1899, at 4. The New York Life Insurance Company had paid Sallie Hillmon Smith's claim before the sixth trial commenced. See *Lawrence Evening Standard*, Oct. 15, 1899, at 4. Mutual of New York paid the judgment against it from the sixth trial. See Satisfaction in Full of Judgment, August 8, 1900 (NARA Archive). But the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company again appealed. A Circuit Court of Appeals having been created since the previous appeal, the appeal was first argued and decided there, in favor of affirmance. *Conn. Mut. Life Ins. Co. v. Hillmon*, 107 F. 834 (1901). Certiorari review was granted by the United States Supreme Court, with the same result as a decade earlier: the Court overturned Mrs. Hillmon's victory and remanded the matter for a new trial. On this occasion the bases for reversal were again issues pertaining to the law of evidence. The Court held that John Brown's affidavit, introduced by Mrs. Hillmon for the limited purpose of showing why she had at one time said she would release the defendants from her claims, should have been received as the truth of the matters it recited and the jury so instructed. It also held that certain statements that witnesses claimed Levi Baldwin had made about a scheme he and John Hillmon had conceived, a scheme that Baldwin said would make him rich, were admissible against Mrs. Hillmon as co-conspirator's statements. *Conn. Mut. Life Ins. Co. v. Hillmon*, 188 U.S. 208 (1903). Before the case could be tried for a seventh time, the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company settled Mrs. Hillmon's claim.
166. Or possibly "ranch." See Transcript 1899, *supra* note 10 at 1689. Concerning originals and copies of this letter, see *infra* note 192.
167. See Brown Affidavit, *supra* note 12 at 165.
168. It may be speculated that Walters actually wrote the letter on the trail after meeting Hillmon and Brown, then handed it off to a traveler going the opposite direction, back toward Wichita, asking him to post it from there. But in such a case why would he not say so, instead of heading the letter

“Wichita”? Moreover, immediately after inscribing this heading the letter writer states that he “will stay here until the fore part of next week & then will leave here” (with Hillmon). The letter was dated March 1, 1879, and postmarked March 2nd, a Sunday. If the writer had kept with his intentions (that’s the idea of the hearsay exception, isn’t it?) he could not have left Wichita until *after* the letter mentioning Hillmon’s name was posted from there, and so could not have met Hillmon for the first time on the trail.

169. See “Brother and Sister Swear It Was Walters,” *supra* note 131.
170. See *supra* note 105.
171. See text accompanying *supra* notes 148–151.
172. See “The Hillman Horror,” *supra* note 10 at 2 (testimony of Dr. Miller). This testimony was offered again at each of the trials to explain why the doctor’s form had ‘9” written over an erased earlier entry (other forms said ‘11”). See, e.g., “W.J. Buchan Tells of J.H. Brown’s Statement,” *Leavenworth Times*, Nov. 3, 1899, at 6. But why would Hillmon have done such a thing, even if he were planning the scheme the defendants attributed to him? Surely he knew his own height, and he could not have known, before leaving home, what height his victim would be.
- It also seems nearly certain that the testimony of Seeley in the fifth trial was perjured, but it is less clear that the attorneys knew that this was the case, as the letter that proved him false was not discovered until some time shortly before the sixth and last trial. Defense counsel wisely did not call Seeley in the sixth trial.
173. J.W. Green was still arguing this proposition in his opening statement in the last trial, twenty years after he certainly had learned that it could not be true. “By Conspiracy,” *Leavenworth Times*, Oct. 18, 1899, at 4 (“The man who was buried at Lawrence was Walters. He was the man who accompanied Hillmon and Brown west from Wichita with the promise of a position on a sheep ranch.”).
174. “Proceedings Before Judges Foster and Brewer—The Hillman Case,” *Leavenworth Times*, June 14, 1885, at 4.
175. Toward the end of this trial it printed a story expressing the sentiment that “where there is such a well-grounded suspicion as there is in this case, the quicker such cases are thrown out of court the better, and the sooner the attempts to defraud insurance companies will be stopped.” “The Hillman Case,” *Leavenworth Times*, June 26, 1885, at 2.
176. A curious piece of evidence offered by the defendants at the last trial, but excluded by the judge (perhaps on hearsay grounds), showed that the Walters family had erected a gravestone in the family cemetery plot inscribed “Frederick Adolph Walters, born January 25th, 1855, died March 17, 1879. Interred at Lawrence, Kansas.” See 1899 Transcript, *supra* note 10 at 1799.
177. See *supra* note 175 and accompanying text.
178. See “Brother and Sister Swear It Was Walters,” *supra* note 131 at 6.
179. See 1899 Transcript, *supra* note 10 at 1687. She balked at specifying whether they were engaged, saying it was nobody’s concern but theirs, but did agree that the two had exchanged rings around December of 1877. *Id.*, at 1691.
180. *Id.*, at 1696. The deposition, like this paragraph, alternates between “Walter” and “Walters” as the family name.
181. Nor did Mrs. Hillmon’s attorneys, of course, but unlike defense counsel they had few resources available to assist in any such persuasion. In any event, it does not seem to have occurred to Mrs. Hillmon’s lawyers that the Kasten letter was not authentic.
182. *Id.*, at 1694.
183. *Id.* At first she said she had destroyed the letters shortly after giving the Wichita letter to Tillinghast; on further questioning she said it had been a year later than that, which would have been only shortly before giving the deposition. She appears, from the transcript, to have been flustered by the questioning, explaining her lapses by saying she was “bothered” (worried, presumably) about her sister, who was ill.

184. "Mrs. Hillmon's Evidence to be Finished Today," *Leavenworth Times*, Oct. 25, 1899, at 4.
185. "Claims Walters Was In Leavenworth In May 1879," *Leavenworth Times*, Nov. 14, 1899, at 4.
186. After the evidence had closed at the last trial, but before the jury was instructed, the Hillmon attorneys asked leave to reopen the case for the testimony of a newly-discovered witness, T.S. Cookson, who was said to be a co-employee who remembered F.A. Walters working at the Simmons cigar factory during the dates testified to by Simmons. The court denied the motion to reopen. "Ready for Arguments in the Hillmon Case," *Leavenworth Times*, Nov. 15, 1899, at 4.
- No aspersion was ever cast on the character of Simmons, at least not in the courtroom. The last-minute timing of his testimony may have made a search for impeachment material hopeless, but years later, reporting retrospectively on the case, the *Topeka Capital* characterized Simmons as "one of the oldest and most substantial cigar manufacturers in Leavenworth." "Hillmon Case is Done For," *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 5, 1903, at 5.
187. It is true that there was also evidence, in various of the Hillmon trials, of sightings of Hillmon after his claimed death at Crooked Creek. But none of these identifications was supported by any documentary or corroborative evidence, and most if not all were highly implausible on their face.
188. See "Claims Walters Was In Leavenworth In May 1879," *supra* note 185 at 4.
189. *Id.*
190. *Id.*
191. See "How it Happened," *supra* note 105.
192. It would be an excellent exercise to compare the handwriting on the Kasten letter to that of other letters written by young Walters, but the original of the Kasten letter is not to be found; in its stead, in the archives of the National Archives and Records Administration, is a copy (marked "Copy")—handwritten, for facsimile copies were unknown in those days. The original (also handwritten) deposition transcript is there; but the copied letter appears to have been substituted for the original "Exhibit C," which would in the ordinary course have been appended to the deposition. The handwritten copy is rather obviously not written in the distinctive elegant copperplate of the notary who recorded the deposition. But at the end of the copy appears this notation: "Received June 24, 1881 a letter of which the above is a true copy," and below this is a signature: J.W. Green, Atty. For Deft."
193. See the examples in *The New Herst-Sampson Catalog*: Kenneth L. Gilman ed., *A Guide to 19th Century United States Postmarks and Cancellations* (North Miami: David G. Phillips Pub. Co., 1989) (copy available from author).
194. *E.g.*, "What's the Verdict?," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Apr. 1, 1896, at 2 (summation of defendants' attorney Isham).
195. See Brown Affidavit, *supra* note 12 at 460. It seems indisputable that John Hillmon paid some of the premium himself, as in the third trial one of the companies' agents produced a promissory note signed by John Hillmon, saying it was for the second premium due to New York Life Insurance Company. "The Hillman Case," *Topeka Commonwealth*, Mar. 16, 1888 at 8 (testimony of A.L. Selig). And another testified at the Lawrence inquest that at the time Hillmon took out the insurance he "paid semi-annual premiums in New York Life and Connecticut, in cash." "Murder Will Out!," *Lawrence Standard*, Apr. 17, 1879, at 4. Of course, he may have borrowed the cash from Baldwin. During the fifth trial it was reported that "arguments were heard for and against the introduction of testimony to show that Levi Baldwin had furnished money to pay premiums on the policies on Hillmon's life, and that he was to receive a portion of the life insurance money." "Buchan Testifies," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Mar. 21, 1896, at 5.
196. "Browns' Confession," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Mar. 10, 1888, at 4 (testimony of J.S. Crew). Another version of the Crew testimony, however, merely has it that Baldwin sought some mercy toward his indebtedness by saying he had borrowed the money in part to pay the premium on Hillmon's life insurance policy. "Very Little Done," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Feb. 22, 1895, at 3; Deposition of James S.

- Crew, August 1892 (NARA Archive). Another witness, a physician, testified that Baldwin had asked him in the fall of 1878 whether it wouldn't be a "good scheme to get your life insured for all you can and have someone represent you as dead and then skip out for Africa or some other d__n place Expert Testimony," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Mar. 11, 1888, at 4 (testimony of Dr. Phillips). The degree of indiscretion this evidence attributes to Baldwin is at variance with the defendants' determined portrayal of him, on other occasions, as a crafty criminal.
197. In the fourth trial, in 1895, Baldwin denied that "he was to get \$10,000 from Mrs. Hillmon" "Hillmon Testimony," *Topeka Daily Capital*, Jan. 20, 1895 at 5.
198. See *Remarkable Stratagems*, *supra* note 32. This compulsively readable true crime book is not an altogether nonpartisan document, having been written by two men very much embedded in the insurance industry. Lewis identifies himself as "Consulting Surgeon and Adjuster, Travelers Insurance Co." and Bombaugh as "Editor, *Baltimore Underwriter*."
199. *Id.*, at 346–351. This account also records that the nominal beneficiary of the policy was a young woman with whom McNutt had been living, and whom he married shortly before embarking on the scheme "in order to legalize the policy." Possibly, the similar brief interval between John Hillmon's marriage to Sallie and the death at Crooked Creek contributed to the companies' suspicions. Certainly they tried to make it seem suspicious; in several of the trials one of their agents testified that Sallie Hillmon had told him that she could not say much about her husband's appearance because she "was not sufficiently well-acquainted with him to give a description." See *e.g.*, "How Tall Was He," *supra* note 60 at 1 (testimony of A.L. Selig). (Sallie Hillmon denied having ever made the statement.)
200. *Id.*, at 126–282. In a slightly later and even more spectacular series of insurance frauds, the serial killer Herman Webster Mudgett, who called himself H.H. Holmes, murdered at least twenty-seven people, many for the purpose of collecting insurance on their lives. Much of Holmes' colorful and gruesome career coincided with the planning and execution of the Chicago World's Fair of 1893; the story of this jarring juxtaposition is told in Erik Larson, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America* (New York: Crown, 2003).
201. In his summation in the last Hillmon trial, James Green even sought to appeal to the jury by reminding them of the Winner-McNutt case (although there had been nothing in evidence about it). "Simmons Testimony a Footless Fancy," *Leavenworth Times*, Nov. 17, 1899, at 4.
202. See *Remarkable Stratagems*, *supra* note 37 at 173.
203. Nor, if I am right and the company lawyers composed the Dearest Alvina letter, must one look beyond the Winner-McNutt case to see what might have inspired the portion of the letter in which the writer claims that John Hillmon "promised me more wages than I could get at anything else."
204. Terry R. Harmon and Charles Sumner Gleed, *A Western Business Leader, 1856–1920* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 1973) (on file with the University of Kansas Library) at 62, 66.
205. *Id.*, at 71.
206. *Id.*, at 70–79.
207. *Id.*, at 79.
208. *Id.*
209. *Id.*, at 189.
210. C.S. Gleed, "As Others See Us," *The Kansas Day Club: Addresses Delivered at Annual Banquets During the First Ten Years of the Club's Existence, 1892–1900, 57–63* (1901) *quoted id.*, at 190–191.
211. See Harmon, *supra* note 204 at 450–51.
212. *Id.*, at 451.
213. *Id.*, at 477.
214. See, *e.g.*, "Taking of Evidence in Hillmon Case Begins," *Leavenworth Times*, Oct. 19, 1899, at 4.

215. See “Hillmon Trial Nearly Done,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, Mar. 10, 1895, at 11.
216. On the question of who owned what interest in the eventual proceeds, there is a great deal of conflicting evidence. In 1882, Sallie Hillmon swore that she had not parted with her interest in any of the cases. See Affidavit of Sallie Hillmon, June 1882 (NARA Archive). In 1888 William Sinclair, the individual who had provided the bond securing any costs Mrs. Hillmon might be required to pay in connection with the litigation, had prayed to be released from his obligation, averring in part that “Sallie E. Hillman has assigned and parted with all of her interest in said several suits,” naming her attorneys and H.S. Clark as the purchasers. Affidavit of Wm. T. Sinclair, January 6, 1888 (NARA Archive). (An H.S. Clark was in 1879 the Sheriff of Douglas County, where Lawrence is located. See *Topeka Daily Capital*, Mar. 12, 1895, at 6). See “Defendants’ Day,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, Feb. 19, 1895, at 4, where reference is made to a document (excluded from evidence) conferring a certain interest in the litigation on the plaintiff’s attorneys.
217. She seems to have been too ill to attend the final trial on the date when it was originally scheduled. See Motion for Continuance, Feb. 14, 1898 (containing affidavits from Mrs. Hillmon and her doctor saying she has been very ill with “la grippe” and cannot bear the strain of a trial at that time)(NARA Archive).
218. Newspaper accounts of the third trial, in 1888, report that “Mrs. Hillman was married some time ago and her name is now Smith,” and that her husband attended the trial with her. “The Seventh Day,” *Lawrence Tribune*, Mar. 16, 1888, at 4. The same story says that the jury is unaware of her remarriage because “the attorneys on each side fear to introduce” evidence of it. *Id.*
219. The *Topeka Daily Capital* reported that Sallie Hillmon Quinn was eighteen when the suit was commenced, which would have made her at most twenty-six at the time of her remarriage. See “Hillmon Case is Done For,” *supra* note 186 at 5.
220. Maguire’s famous article purported to re-examine the case thirty-three years after its original decision. See Maguire, *supra* note 31. To the best of my knowledge, no other legal scholar has looked at the original documents of the litigation since that time. I encourage others to take this step; perhaps someone will notice in this vast repository of paper something I overlooked. The documents in the NARA archive are very fragile and brittle now, and I doubt they will survive even another half-century of storage.
221. See *Crawford v. Washington*, 541 U.S. 36 (2004); *Williamson v. United States*, 512 U.S. 594 (1994); *Idaho v. Wright*, 497 U.S. 805 (1990).