

### American Brutus: John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies

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#### Recommended Citation

Alford, Terry (2005) "American Brutus: John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol7/iss1/33>

## Review

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Winter 2005

**Kauffman, Michael W.** *American Brutus: John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies*. Random House, \$29.95 ISBN 37550785

Eyewitness account

Assassination saga told by those closest to it

Imagine being able to observe the events of April 1865, by thrusting your head through a window, throwing open a door, or peering down a hallway. Such are the pleasures awaiting readers of Michl W. Kauffman's **American Brutus: John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies**, a major new book on the Lincoln assassination.

In a way, this book is the result of Kauffman's thirty-odd-year interest in Booth and the death of Abraham Lincoln. During those decades Kauffman has progressed from history buff to serious student. Recognized as one of the leading authorities in the Lincoln assassination field, he has researched steadily all that time, and he tells us that his interest has even led him to leap from a box to the stage at Ford's Theatre, row across the Potomac, and burn down a Civil-War-era tobacco barn. While the results of these endeavors are probably of more interest to him than of value to history, they show his manifest and devoted curiosity about the topic that has culminated in this impressive book.

In **American Brutus**, Kauffman attempts to do something both novel and important: he tells the story of the assassination as much as possible from contemporary eyewitness accounts of 1865. This approach allows Kauffman to develop the story of Lincoln's murder as it unfolded before the eyes of people who lived at the time and documented events soon after they happened, not years later. We experience first-hand the confusion and anger following Lincoln's death, the rumors spun and the false trails followed, the funeral, the manhunt, and the penultimate scene at Garrett's farm where Booth was shot to death.

Kauffman has designed what he terms a computerized event-based system that allows him to get a handle on the information contained in the National Archives' Lincoln Assassination Suspects file. These documents comprise some 11,000 pages on 16 reels of microfilm. Together with a mass of irrelevancies and nonsense which the reels contain, they form the core papers of the government's investigatory effort in 1865. Kauffman's system enables him to find quickly a particular individual in this unindexed heap and sort him or her by date, place, or associates. The author notes that the system reveals patterns and associations that have been overlooked by earlier writers. Kauffman seems to place little faith (and he gives scant space) to the now-popular notion that Booth was an agent in a grand Confederate plot, the idea advanced so prominently in *Come Retribution* (1988). Booth's Confederate contacts were as much personal as they were professional. And, despite Booth's plain statement to the contrary, Kauffman continues a position taken in earlier writing that Booth did not break his leg at the theater but subsequently on his escape.

Perhaps Kauffman's most controversial paragraphs are those exonerating Dr. Samuel A. Mudd, the Maryland planter who set Booth's broken leg on his flight. Detractors [of Mudd] have built their case on faulty assumptions, he writes. First of all, Booth, while scouting locations and resources in Charles County, Maryland, for his abduction plot, saw Mudd less often than generally believed, Kauffman states. When they did talk, their discussions were about Booth's interest in purchasing land in the area. Such cover conversations were useful to Booth, the author argues, because they allowed him to ask innocent-sounding questions while learning about the lay of the land, roads, neighbors, even community political attitudes.

Only a handful of authors could advance this position and be taken seriously by scholars, but Kauffman is one of those few, and readers will want to examine his conclusions carefully. His position puts him at odds with Edward Steers, Jr., James O. Hall, Thomas R. Turner, and most others (outside the Mudd family circle) who have written on this topic. To reach this conclusion Kauffman faults or calls for a reinterpretation of some contemporary evidence. For example, the author concludes that the testimony of John C. Thompson, the Charles County resident whose family hosted Booth on his two 1864 visits and who introduced him to Mudd, is mistaken in important particulars regarding the doctor. To make this position truly viable, however, it seems to this reviewer that one must do more than doubt or pass over the testimony of Thompson and others: it is necessary to discredit them.

Kauffman's Booth was a fine actor, devoted family member, and good friend, but no longer, by 1865, a very nice person. Enraged by what he saw as Lincoln's betrayal of constitutional government and inflamed by a family legacy of resistance to tyranny, he had become a cunning and remorseless conspirator in a plot to abduct, then to assassinate. These themes in Booth's makeup have been appreciated for some years and therefore are not new, but Kauffman amasses numerous fresh examples of them. And he develops nicely the manner in which Booth threatened, bullied, cajoled, and lied his way forward.

In painting this portrait of the unpleasant Mr. Booth, it struck this reviewer that Kauffman, at times, overreaches. He is convinced that Booth spent considerable effort in incriminating those with knowledge of his plans, making it impossible for them to back out or inform on him. Therefore a horseback ride with his actor chum John McCullough was a deliberate scheme to incriminate the friend. Similarly, the gift of a large empty sword box to actor John Matthews was meant to ensnare him. But surely there are times, as Freud said, when a cigar is just a cigar, a ride just a ride, and a gift just a gift. Even a master conspirator will do inconsequential things from time to time and perform acts which have no larger meaning.

These are small points, however. **American Brutus** is a highly impressive book on the whole. It is filled with new research, original insight, and controversy. Get it today! Lincoln-assassination bookshelves are no longer complete without this volume.

*Terry Alford is Professor of History at Northern Virginia Community College, a founding board member of the Lincoln Institute, and editor of John Wilkes Booth: A Sister's Memoir by Asia Booth Clarke. He is writing a biography of Booth for Oxford University Press.*