

Bloody Crimes: The Chase for Jefferson Davis and the Death Pageant for Lincoln's Corpse.

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Review

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Swanson, James *Bloody Crimes: The Chase for Jefferson Davis and the Death Pageant for Lincoln's Corpse..* William Morrow, \$27.99 ISBN 978-0-06-123378-4

Re-Treading the Aftermath to the Lincoln Assassination

According to the flap copy for *Bloody Crimes*, author James Swanson has “collected books, documents, photographs, art, and artifacts from Abraham Lincoln’s life—and death—since he was ten years old.” In many ways the book itself feels like a collection of primary source materials associated with two closely related, yet still distinct, historical events: the Federal government’s pursuit of Jefferson Davis following his escape from Richmond on April 2, 1865, and the 1,600-mile-long trip the assassinated Abraham Lincoln’s body took later that month from Washington, D. C., to its burial site in Springfield, Illinois. Rather than advancing the critical historical scholarship of the final days of the Civil War or the assassination, it appears that Swanson’s goal is to enable readers to *experience* as immediately as possible the “dramatic, final journeys” (xi) of Davis and Lincoln during what he considers “the most remarkable season in American history” (xiv). Swanson does this by presenting a host of interesting extended quotations from primary sources and a multitude of revealing images in a mostly straightforward, but occasionally somewhat florid, narrative context. Enthusiasts of this era in American history will find much of Swanson’s material appealing, illuminating, and even gripping.

But for scholars there is not much to be gained here. The book does not present or defend a specific thesis; the significance of the relationship between the two “journeys” for which Swanson offers himself as a guide is not clarified; and the nature, style, and limits of his citations make it difficult to evaluate either the origins of a number of the primary materials he has gathered, or the reliability of specific details in the story he aims to tell. Scholars may also quibble with (or dispute outright) some of Swanson’s broad claims, such as that

Lincoln's tour of Richmond following Davis's escape was "certainly the most important day of his presidency" (64); or that Mary Todd Lincoln's "crippling descent into a mad, gothic, self-absorbed grief caused her to neglect the needs of her inconsolable and lonely little boy," Tad (114). As the biographer of Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt, who firmly believed that Davis should be prosecuted for instigating Lincoln's murder (among other crimes), I was struck that Holt does not even make an appearance in Swanson's index. I was struck, too, that the author so readily and decisively dispatched decades of scholarly discussion about Davis's possible involvement in the assassination with the sentence, "Davis did not know John Wilkes Booth and had not sent him to kill Lincoln" (121)—an assertion for which he provided not a single scholarly reference—before declaring grimly that "the government of the United States. . . scheme[d] to charge [Davis] with murder" (121). It seems to me a disservice to all readers to treat any of the weighty issues associated with this particularly "remarkable season in American history" so dismissively, especially when those issues are still so richly resonant in our culture.

Elizabeth D. Leonard is the John J. and Cornelia V. Gibson Professor of History at Colby College and the author of five books on the Civil War era: Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War (1994); All the Daring of the Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies (1999); Lincoln's Avengers: Justice, Revenge, and Reunion after the Civil War (2004); Men of Color to Arms! Black Soldiers, Indian Wars, and the Quest for Equality (2010); and Lincoln's Forgotten Ally: Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt of Kentucky (forthcoming, 2011).