

A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Little Known Witnesses to HistoryBackstage at the Lincoln Assassination

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Feature Essay

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Bogar, Thomas A. *A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Little Known Witnesses To HistoryBackstage at the Lincoln Assassination.* Regnery History, \$27.95 ISBN 9781621570837

Abraham Lincoln's murder on Good Friday, April 14, 1865, opened an ongoing wound. It was America's first presidential regicide. Coming after four years of a brutal war and at the time of the restoration of peace as well as seeking reconciliation between North and South, Lincoln's homicide seemed especially senseless. Occurring just before Easter Sunday, it encouraged making Lincoln a saint akin to Jesus Christ, since some believed that it was punishment for the conflict and the institution of slavery which caused it.

Many, historians and the public alike, have treated the Lincoln assassination as a subset to the epic story of the Civil War. There have been, it is estimated, more than 2,000 books written on the assassination—out of a total of 16,000 written on Lincoln and 65,000 on the war—approximately one a day since the war ended.

Few books have attempted to show how contemporary citizens responded to the crisis at the time and what their response suggests about the American character at the end of a rebellion that nearly toppled the nation. Some Lincoln biographers devote only a few lines to this tragedy and hardly examine or acknowledge the change it made to the country.

In 15 chapters plus an epilogue, this book, as if it were an *Upstairs, Downstairs* presentation, tells the story of 46 personalities of the Ford's Theatre's staff who were present and working at the time of the 10:15 p.m. assassination. The author performs a splendid task in describing these individuals and their activities on this grim day and the atmosphere in Washington, with its shock, confusion and anger.

In addition to many photographs of these personalities, including a map of the neighborhood printed between its covers, the volume is a docudrama with endnotes. And the story is glibly told. It is succinct, entertaining and informative with some overlap of the timeline in order to keep the reader from being confused. The actions of Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt, and Lafayette Baker intrude to intimidate and threaten staff and members of the cast by suggesting testimony—actually suborning perjury.

This is a welcome addition to the Lincoln assassination story as little has been published about the cast and staff. The stories are objectively told and one is left to form his or her own conclusion. The assassination itself is not the focus here as the book concentrates on the players and their activities.

For the assassination itself, one needs to turn to other volumes. One of the best, if not the best, is Edward Steers, Jr.'s *Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (University of Kentucky Press, 2001), which is the definitive account of Lincoln's assassination. Nor is it filled with misinformation such as the commercially successful *Killing Lincoln* by Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard. Steers proves that the conspiracy theories involving Vice President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of War Stanton are totally unreliable but suggests that the Confederate government was aware of John Wilkes Booth's schemes to kidnap Lincoln, if they did not directly support it.

Richard Bak's *The Day Lincoln Was Shot: An Illustrated Chronicle* (Taylor Publishing Company, 1998) includes excellent contributions by authors who are experts in their fields of the assassination. William Hanchett wrote the chapter placing the assassination in context and Harold Holzer wrote the chapter containing background information about President Lincoln. Richard E. Sloan discussed how Lincoln and the assassination has been portrayed in film. The title of this book replicates Jim Bishop's, which was the first book about the assassination that I read at the age of 12. While Mr. Bishop has discounted the value of his *The Day Lincoln Was Shot* (Harper & Row, 1955 – reprinted in 2013) much still commends it as one of the best narratives of the events surrounding the assassination. Bishop's well known style covers the period hour-by-hour, incorporating all of the characters involved.

William Hanchett's *The Lincoln Murder Conspiracy* (University of Illinois Press, 1983) successfully rebuts a broad conspiracy that went beyond John

Wilkes Booth and his cohorts. The allegations attempt to impugn Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. This theory came from Otto Eisenschiml's *Why Was Lincoln Murdered?* published in 1937. His off-the-wall theory influenced many, including Jim Bishop in his *The Day Lincoln Was Shot* and continues to fascinate the public. Hanchett completely disproves Eisenschiml's allegations.

Like Thomas A. Bogar's *Backstage at the Lincoln Assassination...*, Thomas Goodrich's *The Darkest Dawn* (Indiana University Press, 2005) organizes his book, not by the events, but by the key characters involved and the effect the assassination had on them as well as the public.

Kate Larson Clifford, in her *The Assassination's Accomplice, Mary Surratt, and the Plot to Kill Abraham Lincoln* (Basic Books, 2008), argues Mary Surratt was guilty and her death, by hanging, deserved. Despite inexperienced attorneys and trial by a military commission with a foregone verdict, the author presents serious evidence against Mary Surratt, suggesting that the commission reached a correct result despite the many problems with the trial.

In one of the reports by someone who was present at Ford's, Dr. Charles A. Leale's *Lincoln's Last Hours* (Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2010) is the story of the army surgeon's account of Lincoln's fatal wound as he attended Lincoln immediately after the shooting.

For historical fiction, James L. Swanson's *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase For Lincoln's Killer* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2006) is a must read. It is as good as you can get and close to Pulitzer Prize winning *The Killer Angels* by Michael Shaara. *Manhunt* is a narrative by those who sought Booth as well as from Booth and David Herold who were the hunted.

The contemporary account by Louis J. Weichmann in *The True History of the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln and of the Conspiracy of 1865*, edited by Floyd E. Risvold (Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1975), represents the tragic drama of the person who consorted with at least 11 of the characters believed to be involved in the plot to either kidnap or murder Lincoln. Louis Weichmann resided in Mary Surratt's Washington boarding house with the conspirators and was the primary witness for the government against the conspirators. Weichmann remains controversial to this day, with many challenging his credulity and testimony that led to the conviction of Dr. Samuel A. Mudd and the

conviction and execution of Mary Surratt.

And nothing equals Michael Kaufman's *American Brutus: John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies* (Random House, 2005) in describing and understanding John Wilkes Booth.

All these works, including *Backstage at the Lincoln Assassination...*, help place this horrific event within the context of the tumultuous times in which it occurred, and depicts its momentous dimensions. It's a fresh contribution to the Lincoln assassination literature.

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