

### LOOK AT LINCOLN: Lincoln's Long Funeral Procession Through History

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## Feature Essay

Summer 2015

**Williams, Frank J.** *LOOK AT LINCOLN: Lincoln's Long Funeral Procession through History.*

### **Lincoln's Body**

by Richard Wightman Fox

**Publisher:** W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.

**Retail Price:** \$28.95

**ISBN:** 9780393065305

### **Mourning Lincoln**

by Martha Hodes

**Publisher:** Yale University Press

**Retail Price:** \$30.00

**ISBN:** 9780300195804

Lincoln's Long Funeral Procession through History

Abraham Lincoln died on April 15, 1865 – the morning after he was shot by John Wilkes Booth. A funeral train carried his remains more than 1,600 miles from Washington to his final resting place in Springfield – his home town. The 150th anniversary of his assassination and funeral, widely commemorated in

April and May, included an exhibit of the replica of the President's funeral car, a funeral procession through Springfield, and his "internment" in a temporary vault at Oak Ridge Cemetery. Organizers wanted the events – plays, museum exhibits, and re-enactments – to remind people that his death shaped history in ways that are still felt today. His death personified Lincoln's sacrifice as well as redemption in the form of final freedom.

Martha Hodes writes in her important *Mourning Lincoln* that despite the intense and wide-spread hatred for Lincoln that existed during the war, even in the North, there was also intense mourning for him after he was assassinated. With Civil War deaths exceeding 750,000 Americans – most had mourning ribbons and other accoutrement at the ready.

Richard Wightman Fox insists that some Lincoln haters experienced a strong reaction in his favor because of his apparent awkwardness stemming from his unusual height and the length of his stride. Fox writes, "For four years he had flung his door open to all who went to the White House, and here, at the very end, he was still welcoming the common people to his side" with his casket on public view in the Executive Mansion. The President had been admonished by people like Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts that his "public opinion baths" would wear him down. Lincoln responded, "They don't have much, will get but little, so I must see them." Now, millions saw him in the White House and along the tracks for the 12-day journey stopping in the leading the cities of seven states for funeral services.

Both Hodes and Fox point out that the mourning for Lincoln was real and the train ride of his remains to Springfield moved Americans in a way that is still reflected in Lincoln mythology. Both authors point out that the President who led the North to victory is more admirable than the myth and this is the President whose death silenced, but did not convert, all his enemies.

Fox is exceedingly skillful – as is Hodes – in claiming that the shot fired at Ford's Theatre on the night of April 14th was only the first engagement in a long war that followed Appomattox – a struggle for citizenship by African Americans. But neither author fully pursues this aspect of the story.

*Lincoln's Body* is a tour de force describing how Lincoln has been interpreted and used during the past 150 years – in speeches, statues, plays, films, poems, and artwork. While most impressive when writing about the

Lincoln Memorial, with the attendees segregated when it was dedicated in 1922, Fox is very deferential when writing about Steven Spielberg's film *Lincoln* and Doris Kearns Goodwin's popular book, *Team of Rivals*.

Of the many recent publications commemorating the sesquicentennial of the death of the best president America ever produced, both books contribute significantly to understanding this awful event. Hodes explores diaries, letters, and other personal writings written during the spring and summer of 1865 to obtain the reactions to the death. "Tears' the saddest day in our history," wrote one, and "An electric shock to my soul," wrote a free black who had escaped from slavery, while a Lincoln enemy exclaimed, "Glorious News!"

Both books add to our understanding that the war did not end with Lincoln's death as the quest for peace among our "House Divided" is even now illusory.

*Frank J. Williams is the Chair of the Lincoln Forum and author of Lincoln as Hero, and is a contributing columnist for the Civil War Sesquicentennial.*