

LOOK AT LINCOLN: Diverse Scholarship on Lincoln's Life, and His Death

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Feature Essay

Spring 2016

Williams, Frank J. *LOOK AT LINCOLN: Diverse Scholarship on Lincoln's Life, and His Death.*

A Close Look at America's Most Infamous Assassin

Fortune's Fool: The Life of John Wilkes Booth

by Terry Alford

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Retail Price: \$29.95

ISBN:9780195054125

Of the 16,000 books and pamphlets written about Abraham Lincoln since his assassination, over 2,000 of them relate to his death and the military trial and execution of the assassins. Along with Michael W. Kauffman's *American Brutus: John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies* (2004), *Fortune's Fool* provides a comprehensive view of Booth. Clearly enigmatic, his dastardly deed shocked the country. He was well liked and occasionally lazy. But at heart, he was obsessed with the Confederacy and its search for independence.

Alford describes in great breath and detail Booth's trajectory in finally accepting the fact that the Confederacy was about to end in April 1865. He

sincerely believed that the only chance of its survival was to commit regicide. It is a compelling story about a character who once was billed as “the youngest star in the world.”

The author presents fresh revelations about Booth’s early history when he tortured cats as a boy. One views his peripatetic stage career, involving political extremism and the grisly final hours brought by him and his merry gang including the murder of the president and the severe wounding of the secretary of state, William H. Seward.

This long awaited biography is the result of Alford’s twenty-five years researching the story in libraries and archives. He has chased down every detail, myth, and ephemera relating to the assassination. Far from being an apologist for the assassin, Alford eschews conspiracy theories and presents a scholarly version of Booth, his contemporaries, and the assassination. He concludes that Booth is repulsive and a murderer. This was a man who, with a single act, may have postponed for a century any chance of racial reconciliation.

A major reason that Booth supported the Confederate States stemmed from his racism and fear of black political equality. The author also marginalizes the view of many that the assassin had support from the Confederate government’s leaders. Arguments continue about the assassination and in that sense explains why the Civil War continues.

This is an outstanding volume that was well worth the wait. *Lincoln’s Love of Shakespeare*

Lincoln and Shakespeare

by Michael Anderegg

Publisher: University Press of Kansas

Retail Price: \$29.95

ISBN:9780700621293

As an autodidact, Abraham Lincoln enjoyed Shakespeare's work from an early age and it became a lifelong interest. After he received the gift of Shakespearian actor James H. Hackett's book from the author, he wrote back in the midst of the Civil War, on August 17, 1863,

Months ago I should have acknowledged the receipt of your book and accompanying kind note; and I now have to beg your pardon for not having done so... . Some of Shakespeare's plays I have never read; while others I have gone over perhaps as frequently as any unprofessional reader. Among the latter are *Lear*, *Richard Third*, *Henry Eighth*, *Hamlet*, and especially *Macbeth*. I think nothing equals *Macbeth*. It is wonderful. Unlike you gentlemen of the profession, I think the soliloquy in *Hamlet*, commencing 'Oh, my offence is rank' surpasses that commencing 'To be or not to be' (85).

While Lincoln was criticized for his letter (Hackett had leaked it to a newspaper), it certainly confirms his abiding love for the Bard's work. He related to it, especially in his roles as President and Commander-in-Chief. The plays he mentions in his letter to Hackett are tragedies rather than comedies.

With acuity, Walt Whitman wrote, "I would say that what Shakespeare did in poetic expression, Abraham Lincoln essentially did in his personal and official life." In getting "Right with Lincoln," novelists, filmmakers, and playwrights have shown Lincoln quoting Shakespeare. Michael Anderegg's book is a welcome entry to the Lincoln bookshelf (some 16,000) as it details Lincoln's fascination and knowledge of Shakespeare's plays.

Both Lincoln and Shakespeare were wordsmiths loved language. And both were fatalists. Oddly enough, Lincoln would often quote from Shakespeare's work while visitors or staff were present as is documented in diaries, letters, and newspapers, but he seldom included Shakespearian quotes in his writings.

Anderegg discusses in detail the themes from Shakespeare that resonated so well with the President – Civil War, corruption, illegitimate rule, and ambition. The author relates how Lincoln became interested in Shakespeare and the plays he read before he became president. As the nation's Chief Magistrate, Lincoln had the opportunity to view great Shakespearian actors like Edwin Booth, Charlotte Cushman, Edwin Forrest, in addition to James H. Hackett. Despite the

terrible burden of the presidency, Lincoln took the time to watch Hackett's performance as Falstaff on several occasions.

This book performs a real service to those interested in Abraham Lincoln, the theater, and William Shakespeare.

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 and Reconstruction. He, along with Michael Burkimer, is the coeditor of The Lincoln Assassination Riddle: Revisiting the Crime of the Nineteenth Century (Kent State University Press).