

Stealing Lincoln's Body

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Review

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Craughwell, Thomas J. *Stealing Lincoln's Body*. Harvard University Press, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 9780674024588

A Bizarre Plot

On the night before the presidential election of 1876, three graverobbers tried to steal the body of Abraham Lincoln from its resting place in the imposing Lincoln Monument in Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois. Ill-conceived and doomed to failure, this bizarre plot was widely reported at the time but remains little known today, even among diehard Lincoln specialists, let alone the general public. Now Thomas J. Craughwell's *Stealing Lincoln's Body* provides a fresh retelling that analyzes the episode within the broader context of America's post-Civil War society and culture, offers intriguing new details and insights, and uncovers surprising connections that lend the entire affair more historical significance than ever before. In the process, Craughwell not only delivers a gritty narrative worthy of the best Gothic detective fiction but also employs the misbegotten bodysnatching as a window into the aging Civil War generation's resolve to enshrine and commemorate their heroes, the emerging world of organized crime in the late 19th century, and the burgeoning federal bureaucracy charged with keeping order in an increasingly chaotic, urban world.

Craughwell has painstakingly pieced together his narrative from a trove of archival sources, ranging from the letters of Mary Todd Lincoln and Robert Lincoln to the daily reports of the U.S. Secret Service to the convict register of the Illinois State Penitentiary at Joliet to the records of the Lincoln Guard of Honor, an ad hoc society of old Lincoln friends who spent decades keeping watch over the 16th president's remains. The basic plot is, by itself, outlandish. A ring of counterfeiters plans to steal Lincoln's body, bury it in the Indiana Dunes along Lake Michigan, hold it for \$200,000 in ransom, and compel the governor of Illinois to release one of their number from the Joliet penitentiary. One of the plotters, however, is an informant, which allows a cadre of Secret Service agents

and Pinkerton men to monitor the plan as it evolves, foil the crime, and catch the bodysnatchers red-handed. As the narrative unfolds from Lincoln's assassination to the final interment of his remains in 1901, Craughwell embellishes the tale by weaving together surprising contextual details, a cast of fascinating supporting characters, and a flair for crisp storytelling.

As Craughwell follows Lincoln's body from the Petersen House to the White House to the Capitol and finally on its circuitous train ride to Springfield, we learn about the elaboration of Victorian funerary customs and advancements in embalming prompted by the Civil War generation's desire both to honor and to preserve their fallen heroes. Chillingly, the goal was not merely preservation but the virtual transformation of the dead into near-marblelike statuary. Craughwell reviews the choice between burying Lincoln in Oak Ridge Cemetery, one of the new rural cemeteries or memorial parks, and a more traditional location in downtown Springfield. Mary Lincoln insisted on the Oak Ridge location, much to the consternation of local boosters who preferred an urban monument to draw mourners and therefore tourist dollars into the downtown. He chronicles the U.S. government's creation of the greenbacks to help finance the Civil War and the subsequent formation of the Secret Service to combat the intensified practice of counterfeiting that resulted. The book's most fascinating character, without doubt, is the hard-boiled federal agent Patrick Tyrrell, who innovated modern forms of law-enforcement while doggedly pursuing the conspirators. Other key figures include the Lincoln Guard of Honor, the self-appointed custodians of both Lincoln's remains and his memory in Springfield, as well as Mary Todd Lincoln and Robert Lincoln, who engaged in their own struggle for control over Lincoln's legacy. Robert Lincoln emerges as an imperious and emotionally detached presence who obsessively placed his father's and his family's reputation above all other considerations, much to the detriment of his mother, in particular. One of the most intriguing subplots that Craughwell introduces is the rise of bodysnatching, for both medical and political purposes, during the mid-19th century, which puts the Lincoln plot into broader historical context. Other notable victims were John Scott Harrison, son of one president and father of another, and department-store magnate A. T. Stewart. One legacy of the Lincoln plot was to convince industrialist George Pullman to order his own coffin encased in concrete and steel to preclude a similar fate. Another legacy was harsher penalties for bodysnatching under Illinois law. Craughwell concludes by tracing the disposition of Lincoln's body from 1876 until its final interment in 1901, which is a harrowing story unto itself.

As its very title implies, *Stealing Lincoln's Body* is something of a boisterous romp through both the unseemly underworld and the staid old guard of late 19th-century Illinois. Craughwell has succeeded in telling an improbable tale with confidence while drawing a host of broader connections to American social and cultural history. The book is enlivened by more than two-dozen well chosen photographs (although surely the provenance and history of the sole surviving photo of Lincoln's corpse, which is fascinating, deserves at least passing mention). Technical problems include a too-spare index and a typographical error in the table of contents that are both unexpected in any Harvard University Press publication. An epilogue that traces the subsequent histories of key participants in the story rather than ruminating on what the entire episode tells us about the larger cultural legacies of Lincoln and the Civil War represents a lost opportunity. But as a historical tale of intrigue told with both narrative zest and academic rigor, *Stealing Lincoln's Body* is a thoroughly enjoyable and worthwhile addition to the growing list of Lincoln scholarship.

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