

The Legend of John Wilkes Booth: Myth, Memory, and a Mummy

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Review

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Evans, C. Wyatt *The Legend of John Wilkes Booth: Myth, Memory, and a Mummy*. University of Kansas Press, \$24.95 ISBN 700613528

A corpse's voyage

Memory's refusal to let Booth die

Like all survival myths, the legend of John Wilkes Booth's extended escape from Ford's Theater initially seems to be outright nonsense, devoid of any real significance. C. Wyatt Evans's superb telling of what seems a tabloid tale, however, gradually reveals, not only the folly, but the deeper implications of Booth's flight into our collective memory.

Evans, an assistant professor of history at Drew University, doesn't try to solve the mystery--if it is a mystery--of who was hauled out of a blazing barn on Garrett's Virginia farm on April 26, 1865, a dozen days after Lincoln's assassination, and then later disposed of under mysterious circumstances. Rumors that Booth was not in the barn and escaped capture began circulating almost immediately. Many putative Booths wandered the countryside, but when a drifter named David George poisoned himself to death in Enid, Oklahoma in 1903, and the wife of a Methodist minister came forward to reveal she had heard George confess that he was the assassin, George's corpse began its strange progression from cadaver to mummy to objectified myth of the Civil War itself.

Memphis attorney Finis L. Bates, according to Evans, probably read about George in a Memphis newspaper and then connected the drifter to a Texas saloonkeeper who had allegedly told Bates that he was Booth. Bates apparently then managed to take possession of the body, which he exhibited, rented out to carnival operators, and tried to sell to Henry Ford. In 1907, Bates published *Escape and Suicide of John Wilkes Booth*, implicating Andrew Johnson in the plot to kill Lincoln, and portraying Booth as both honorable vindicator and repentant assassin, an image acceptable to both North and South. After Bates'

death in 1923, his widow sold the mummy, which continued its journey as a roadside attraction before officially vanishing sometime in the 1940s and winding up, according to rumor, somewhere inside the Capital Beltway and, figuratively at least, in the shadow of Lincoln's gaze.

If Bates was a mountebank, he was at least a skillful one in building a documentary case to support his claims. Evans suggests that Bates' extensive files along with the mummy comprise a scattered archive that stands as an early attempt to correct history and, accordingly, is one of the first examples of American conspiracy thinking, with its belief that the nation's government was at the center of a massive plot against its people. The documentation, he argues, dignifies popular legend by packaging it as history, thereby encouraging conspiracy theorists and provoking a reaction from professional historians who claim the high ground as serious students of the assassination and other Civil War events. Bates was only one of many who attempted to challenge the official version of events, and Evans places the Booth survival myth in an expansive context.

Much to his credit, Evans insists that the study of marginal cultural phenomenon, or vernacular memory, can tell us a great deal about how the past is remembered. The legend's carnival setting and blatant antagonism toward historical truth should not dissuade us from taking it seriously, he writes. In fact, the first benefit of this perspective is that it lets us see that if the legend is a myth (as its critics maintain), it is one among many. While the Booth legend can provide a fresh perspective for cultural historians, the story can also be twisted to serve more sinister aims, spawning racial and political ideologies. Memory can become overwritten by other messages to form counternarratives that muddle our understanding of the past and undermine our confidence that what happened can ever be ascertained. By understanding the deeper purposes that counternarratives serve, the historian can comprehend what function history serves in everyday life. To a modern generation well familiar with conspiracy literature of all stripes, the Booth case is congruent with what Richard Hofstadter explained as the paranoid style in American politics.

This is difficult history to write, and Evans pulls it off splendidly. I have yet to lose my sense of wonder at how groups in American society employ the strangest stuff to order their world views and justify their beliefs, he writes.

Half the fun of reading this richly rewarding book comes from dipping into the footnotes where we learn some amazing things. For example, the FBI kept a file on the Booth caper, and in 1923 Herbert Hoover, then secretary of commerce, was asked to review the contents, which included Bates' book. Just what Hoover and the FBI thought of Bates' story, which serves as the Ur-text for Booth survival buffs, is not recorded, but the fact that a future president was poring through such documents almost 60 years after Booth leaped from Lincoln's box and staggered out of the theater into history shows the potency of the Booth legend.

Paul Ashdown is professor of journalism and electronic media at the University of Tennessee. He is the author of A Cold Mountain Companion and co-author of The Mosby Myth: A Confederate Hero in Life and Legend, and The Myth of Nathan Bedford Forrest.