

# Lincoln's Final Hours: Conspiracy, Terror, and the Assassination of America's Greatest President

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## Review

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**Canavan, Kathryn** *Lincoln's Final Hours: Conspiracy, Terror, and the Assassination of America's Greatest President*. University Press of Kentucky, \$29.95 ISBN 9780813166087

### A Vivid Look at Lincoln's Final Hours

Lincoln's death produced perhaps the saddest days in American history. The fact that Lincoln's assassination came just days after the end of a nearly four-year Civil War added a level of emotional anguish unprecedented in American history. Writing in brisk, crisp sentences and using short chapters, Kathryn Canavan tells the tale of the end of Lincoln's life in a refreshingly conversational style, one that matches the matter-of-fact nature of her topic. *Lincoln's Final Hours* is a marvelous book filled with one memorable and astonishing fact and detail after another.

Throughout this manuscript, Caraven makes the reader feel as if they were there: in Petersen's boarding house, in Ford's theatre, in Booth's deranged mind. Canavan offers a remarkable history of Washington D.C.; Ford's theatre; the colorful and eccentric Booth family, its odd history, and all the drama in that celebrity family; Booth's erratic and irrational behavior; the Petersen boarding house; the stage actors in the play Lincoln attended when he was shot; the festive atmosphere that bathed Washington the week of April 9; an especially detailed and fascinating section of the nature of the relationship between the rather ambitious Abraham Lincoln and the equally go-getting Mary Todd; an almost hour-by-hour account of what the major players were doing during the day and early evening of April 14 and the morning of April 15, including a retracing of Booth's steps, seemingly minute-by-minute, on that fateful day when he shot the president; and an especially riveting account of Booth's escape and capture.

Canavan's writing is cinematic throughout, making it easy for the reader to visualize each and every scene, and she also beautifully captures the mood of the era. *Lincoln's Final Hours* has not only first-rate detailed research but a writing

style perfectly matched to its subject matter.

No detail is too trivial for Canavan. Among her vivid descriptions include: what people ate; what they were wearing; how tall this chair was, how long that bed, how many feet a certain door was from another room, how many feet this person was standing from that person; the ever-changing weather; the smells in the air; what someone would have seen from where he was standing that Friday in April, 1865; a seemingly second-by-second account of how Booth snuck into the president's box, shot Lincoln, jumped to the stage, addressed the stunned crowd, ran through the theatre and escaped out a back door; the assortment of rumors about the assassination that spread throughout Washington, and later the Nation, immediately after Lincoln was shot; the scene of mostly Black mourners outside Petersen's home; and the details of Lincoln's elaborate funeral and train procession back to Springfield.

As a prayer was spoken by one person at Lincoln's bed, Canavan writes, one advisor "pulled his pencil from his pocket to copy the prayer for posterity, but its point caught in his coat and broke" (118). Canavan even describes the exact location of the bloody rags and of Lincoln's brain matter on the floor of his room in the Petersen house as he lay dying. She also describes the frantic rush to collect souvenirs from Petersen's, and the crass way that people bought and sold mementos from that night—one person cut rags into squares, soaked them with blood from the floor (probably not Lincoln's, but the blood from a man cut by Booth as he struggled after shooting Lincoln), and then sold the squares.

One also gets an assortment of fascinating factoids:

Booth had slept, one week earlier, in the same bed that Lincoln died in; John C. Breckinridge had also boarded there in the 1850s.

An actress on the stage saw Booth just moments before he entered the president's box; when Booth caught her eye, he then bowed to her.

William Petersen left his boarding house to go back to work as Lincoln lay dying; later, he would bill the federal government for a variety of expenses, including "renting" the room Lincoln died in, and for "the use of his home, his furniture, his linens, his servants' time, and his own time—although he had left the house at least seven hours before the president succumbed" (158).

When Petersen's daughter got married in 1873, she deposited two pillowcases, stained with Lincoln's blood from the night he died, in a bank vault.

Many of Lincoln's advisors shamelessly wanted to pose for the paintings made at Lincoln's deathbed; one advisor had the gall to sit for three different paintings.

Nineteenth century theatergoers were a passionate lot: an 1849 riot between fans of rival actors left twenty-two people dead and many hundreds injured.

One final sampling of the author's eye for detail: The man who shot Booth as he evaded capture after shooting Lincoln, Boston Corbett, was a religious fanatic who was probably insane; before he joined the Union Army, he had, in a fit of religious inspiration, "cut open his own scrotum, pulled out his testicles, and cut them off. That night, he attended a prayer meeting, ate an ample meal, and took a walk. He sought medical help only after his scrotum turned black and swollen" (146).

The text is also accompanied throughout by a terrific series of photos and illustrations, enlightening *Lincoln's Final Hours* in numerous ways. Wonders await the reader of this terrific book. I have taught the Civil War for over twenty years, and yet found in this account a myriad of new and fascinating details about Lincoln's assassination that I plan to incorporate into my future classes.

*Bernard von Bothmer teaches American history at the University of San Francisco and at Dominican University of California. He received a B.A. with honors from Brown University, an M.A. from Stanford University, and a Ph.D. in American History from Indiana University, and is the author of Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush (University of Massachusetts Press, 2010). He can be contacted at bvonbothmer@yahoo.com.*