

John Wilkes Booth and the Women Who Loved Him

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Review

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Abel, E. Lawrence. *John Wilkes Booth and the Women Who Loved Him.*
Regnery History, \$29.99 ISBN 9781621575962

A Different Look at the Lincoln Assassination

E. Lawrence Abel, a distinguished emeritus professor at Wayne State University in Detroit and an equally distinguished Lincoln assassination buff has given readers, in *John Wilkes Booth and the Women Who Loved Him*, another way to look at the man who killed President Lincoln: through the women with whom he came in contact. When I received the book for review, I admit my first thought was, "Oh no. 'Real Housewives of Washington!'" I am pleased to report that I was wrong. Abel has chosen a different path in his search for the "truth of Booth" and it has led him through some very legitimate territory.

The book focuses on the subjects of five *cartes de visite* that were found in Booth's pocket after his body was searched at the Garret Farm. Initially unidentified, they now have all been accounted for. They include Alice Gray, Helen Western, Fanny Brown, Effie Germon, and Lucy Hale. All but Miss Lucy Hale were actresses with varying degrees of professional success. Booth's mother, Mary Ann Holmes Booth, gets her fair share of the book as well. Her handsome younger son John was her favorite, although she was not ignorant of his shortcomings. She warned him to control his impetuosity, apparently to no avail.

Booth historiography claims John Wilkes was a mediocre, second-rate actor trading on his famous father's (and brother's) name. This book argues with that point of view. It claims that John was not only a fine actor, but initially used the name John Wilkes, among others, so that the Booth name would not be seen as a point of entry into the acting profession. Speaking of being an actor in the mid 1800s, *JWB and the Women Who Loved Him* contains a great deal of information concerning the professional lives of actors and actresses. It was certainly not glamorous, but rather a tedious round of part development, staging, and trying to find places to perform. Theater life seemed to continue unperturbed right through the war.

Abel makes very little of the conspiracy angle concerning Lincoln's eventual assassination. Initially the plan was to kidnap Lincoln and hold him hostage as a Confederate bargaining chip. The plan, never supported by the Confederate government,

unraveled as Lincoln increased his personal protection to and from the Soldiers' Home. Within days Booth decided to drop that idea, but dithered around trying to come up with another one. When he finally decided on assassination, the rest of the plot was hastily thrown together and, ultimately, unsuccessful (except for Lincoln).

Two things in particular stand out in this biography: the idea that John Wilkes Booth had syphilis, and the continuation of the myth that Booth broke his leg as he jumped down to the stage of Ford's Theater from the Presidential box. There is no proof of either one. Venereal disease was a problem for which there was no cure in the mid 1800s, but the timed progression of the disease of syphilis in particular does not match the Booth assassination time line. And, it was disappointing to read a current author still claiming that Booth's leg was broken on the stage. The break was, according to information about Booth's body and Dr. Mudd's analysis, not a severe one, but it was enough to have kept him from continuing to run out of Ford's, reach his horse, then mount and ride. Booth's own notes indicate that the final break came when his horse fell in swampy land outside the capital. Perhaps this is a minor point, but for followers of the assassination, it certainly adds to a sense of the desperation Booth must have felt as he attempted to escape.

Other than these two issues, the book *John Wilkes Booth and the Women Who Loved Him* is well written, copiously researched, and presented in two parts. The first is Booth's story, and the second allows the reader to know what happened to each of the five women who just happened to give the handsome actor a CDV to remember her by. Abel gives us a glimpse into Booth's world, theatrical as well as political.

Meg Groeling received her Master's degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: the Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which Southern Illinois University Press has contracted for publication sometime within the next two years. She is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War, and reviews a lot of books. Meg can be reached at bloodnight@aol.com.