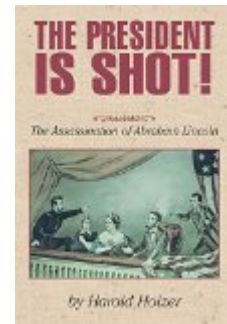


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Harold Holzer. *The President is Shot! The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*. Honesdale: Boyd's Mill Press, 2004. 181 pp. \$17.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56397-985-9.

Reviewed by Gerald Prokopowicz (Department of History, East Carolina University)
Published on H-CivWar (August, 2006)



The Death (and Life) of Abraham Lincoln

A common flaw in popular historical treatments of Abraham Lincoln is to emphasize the dramatic story of his death, at the expense of describing his life and accomplishments. When the cable network A&E produced what was ostensibly a Lincoln “biography” several years ago, for example, almost 40 percent of the screen time was devoted to the president’s assassination. Here, Harold Holzer has inverted this trend by writing an assassination book for young readers that provides so many contexts for the events of April 14, 1865, that the result is actually a brief biography. The book seems to have been written with the assumption (not entirely unreasonable) that the average eighth-grade reader will know almost nothing about Lincoln, slavery, or the Civil War, and thus must be filled in on these basic topics before the assassination can become meaningful. Why such a reader would choose a book on Lincoln’s assassination is not clear, but perhaps the publisher hopes to hook the unsuspecting with a dramatic title and a cover illustration showing the moment when Booth pulled the trigger, thus giving the author his chance to impart as much background information as he can before the reader’s limited attention span runs out and he or she wanders away to resume playing Nintendo.

The bait-and-switch approach extends through the introduction, consisting of a description of the church bells of Washington ringing in celebration of the surrender of Lee’s army on April 9, 1865 and then again in mourning for Lincoln less than a week later. With chapter 1, the book begins to tell Lincoln’s story with a flashback to 1860, followed by another to 1854, then a sec-

tion on the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 and finally a full-fledged dip into biography beginning with Lincoln’s birth in 1809 that mentions New Salem, Ann Rutledge, Mary Todd, and other landmarks in Lincoln’s early life. Two sidebars introduce the reader to the four children of Abraham and Mary. The remainder of this ambitious chapter summarizes the role of slavery in causing the Civil War and the course of emancipation during the war.

Chapter 2 introduces the idea of assassination, discussing the death threats Lincoln received and the security precautions that he refused to undertake. In the third chapter, we meet John Wilkes Booth. Holzer’s interpretive approach is to place Booth and his actions squarely in their political context, synthesizing the most recent scholarship on the subject. Holzer’s Booth is no madman or frustrated actor, but a dedicated Confederate sympathizer and white supremacist who hoped to save a losing cause by striking a blow against a man he saw as a tyrant. In this, Holzer follows the historical consensus of the last decade, as found in works like John Rhodehamel and Louise Taper’s *“Right or Wrong, God Judge Me”: The Writings of John Wilkes Booth* (1997).

The assassination itself takes place in chapter 4, which is twice as long as any other chapter. It includes a detailed account of Lincoln’s last day and is illustrated (like the rest of the book) with numerous period drawings and photographs of artifacts. The remaining three chapters cover the day after the shooting (including Lincoln’s death and Booth’s flight), the nation’s response to the tragedy, and the capture and punishment of Booth

and his conspirators.

Does the book succeed? Older readers might find its organization choppy, especially in the early pages when it jumps from one decade to another, but to the post-MTV generation at which it is aimed this may be conventional. There are also moments when the strategy of trying to tell as many interesting stories as possible might overwhelm the young reader. For a case in point, consider the sidebar featuring two prints of the Lincoln family (pp. 36-37).

Holzer is unquestionably the leading authority on the subject of Lincoln iconography, with many publications to his credit, and here he cannot resist sharing two very different images of the Lincolns in the White House, and explaining how these prints were crafted after the war to create a false image of Lincolnian domesticity.[1] The sidebar is accurate and interesting in itself, but only tenuously related to the subject of the book. To the reader anxious to learn about the assassination, less might have been more here.

The author's desire to tell his young readers so much of the Lincoln story, on so many levels, implies an apprehension that this might be the only book on Lincoln they will ever read. For some, that will be the case, but for many this combination of relevant illustrations and accessible writing will be just the thing to strike a spark of interest in the motivated young reader. There is cer-

tainly little enough competition among books for this age group, as the bibliography indirectly makes clear. It includes the works of David Chesebrough and Thomas Turner on Northern responses to the assassination, for example, which are both fine academic monographs, but well beyond the range of most middle-school age readers, while the standard Lincoln book for this age group, Russell Freedman's excellent *Lincoln: A Photobiography*, is missing.[2]

Given the scarcity of worthwhile books on Lincoln for this audience, *The President is Shot! The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* would be a worthy addition to any middle-school library.

Notes

[1]. See Harold Holzer, Gabor S. Boritt, and Mark E. Neely Jr., *The Lincoln Image: Abraham Lincoln and the Popular Print* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

[2]. Thomas Reed Turner, *Beware the People Weeping: Public Opinion and the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); David B. Chesebrough, "No Sorrow Like Our Sorrow": *Northern Protestant Ministers and the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1994); and Russell Freedman, *Lincoln: A Photobiography* (New York: Clarion Books, 1987).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Gerald Prokopowicz. Review of Holzer, Harold, *The President is Shot! The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. August, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12149>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.