

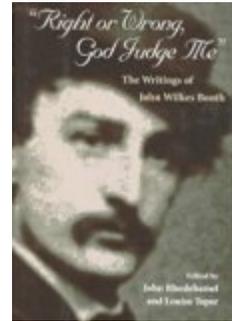
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Rhodehamel, Louise Taper, eds. *"Right or Wrong, God Judge Me": The Writings of John Wilkes Booth*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xii + 171 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02347-7.

Reviewed by Bruce Turner (Head of Archives and Special Collections, University of Southwestern Louisiana)

Published on H-CivWar (July, 1998)



This volume supposedly contains all the extant writings of John Wilkes Booth, from a letter to a friend in January, 1854 (when Booth was 15) to a pocket book diary entry made several days before his death in April, 1865. Editors John Rhodehamel and Louise Taper are, respectively, Curator of American History at the Huntington Library and the owner of one of the largest private collections of both Abraham Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth materials. They have gathered these documents from an impressive array of sources: manuscript collections and archives; private collections; manuscript dealers' catalogs which gave the text of Booth letters for sale; and even writings entered into Congressional hearings. The editors believe that more Booth items will appear on the manuscript market. One hopes the documents yet to be uncovered will provide more enlightenment about the actor/assassin than does the present collection.

The editors provide a preface, acknowledgments, introduction, explanation of editorial method, list of all known Booth documents (including cancelled checks), bibliography, and index. The bibliography is quite extensive, although only a small percent is cited in footnotes to either the documents or the editors' introductions. The bulk of the book consists of Booth's writings, which are arranged basically chronologically in five subsections, each with its own introduction: early years (1854-February, 1860); speech on secession (December, 1860); theatrical tours as star performer (1861-1864); letters to Isabel Sumner (Summer, 1864); and conspiracy against Lincoln (1864-1865).

For this reviewer the most interesting section dealt with Booth's stage career. He served as his own agent,

so he wrote to theater managers in cities where he was scheduled or hoped to perform. Booth also recounted some of the difficulties encountered by traveling actors, including transportation and severe weather. Booth was obviously very successful in his chosen profession. The editors include newspaper reviews of his performances in their notes. His usual repertoire, which was performed with stock players provided by the theater, included Shakespeare's *Richard III* and *Julius Ceasar*, both of which contained politically inspired murders. The editors assert, "Throughout Booth's short life, the line between the drama and the world was always a little blurred, and many of the plays he acted were violent, bloody spectacles studded with killings" (p. 5). Since a number of documents in this subsection are from a Booth family collection in New York City, the John Ford Collection at the Library of Congress, theatrical collections at Princeton University, the University of Tulsa, the Dallas Public Library, and the Folgers Shakespeare Library, it is obvious that there are better sources for information about theatrical life and careers in the early 1860s than those that appear in this book. The early letters are brief recountings of activities sent to a friend. Other than mentioning Booth's interest in the American Party and in a theatrical career, they shed very little light on Booth's personality. The Sumner letters simply show Booth's infatuation with a young woman from Boston.

The editors have carefully footnoted each document and have provided separate introductions for each subsection. These materials do present a biography of John Wilkes Booth, but they also introduce some questionable historical statements and interpretations. In addition, some of the arrangement of information is more distract-

ing to the reader than it should be. The opening introduction discusses Booth's entire life. He was the son of one of England's and the United States' best-known actors, Junius Brutus Booth, who came to this country with his mistress, whom he eventually married. John Wilkes was one of three brothers who became very successful actors. Unlike the rest of the family, Booth was a southern sympathizer who strongly disliked Lincoln. The few political writings in the collection contain fairly standard diatribes against northern aggression, especially the heinous abolitionists, and in defense of the constitutionality of slavery. The depth of Booth's dislike of freedom and equality for blacks is remarkable. Booth probably hated Lincoln more for the Emancipation Proclamation than for the defeat of the South. That document seemed to be the basis for his theory that Lincoln would make himself into a tyrant.

The introductions before each subsection deal in part with the same events covered in the opening comments. The editors have a tendency to provide further information in these subsequent retellings which the reader wishes had been included initially. This is especially true regarding Booth's participation in a Richmond militia unit that was present at John Brown's hanging.

The editors put Booth's career into the historical context of southern resentment, secession, and war, which is where it should be considered. They take special pains to point out that Lincoln was widely and thoroughly disliked by people in both the South and the North. It almost seems as if they use Lincoln's unpopularity as a defense for Booth's crime. According to the editors, the constitutional crisis of December, 1860, stemmed from Lincoln's election. South Carolina's secession is not mentioned as a factor. They point out that some of Booth's pro-South sentiments parallel ideas held by James Buchanan, a northerner who, implicitly, reflected the attitudes of a majority of people in his section. No mention is made that Buchanan was known as a northern man with southern principles, which placed him in a definite minority. The editors say that Lincoln's life was in danger from the moment he was elected in 1860. The only actual plot mentioned, however, failed miserably in February/March, 1865. Booth was not part of this plan, which was undertaken by the Confederate Secret Service. However, some speculate that if the actor knew

of it, it might have given him the idea for his own assassination effort. The editors consider Lincoln's re-election in November, 1864, as one of the turning points of the war. Since the Confederacy had only five months to survive then, the turning points surely occurred earlier, such as in July, 1863, or April, 1862. It is asserted that historians have recently decided that Lincoln's assassination had little if any impact on the course of Reconstruction, but no citations are given to support this contention.

There are some incidents in Booth's life which reflect a portion of his personality not illuminated either by the documents or by the narrative of the editors. In 1854, Booth assaulted a tenant farmer who had been arrogant toward Booth's mother and made disparaging remarks to his sister. In 1864 Booth was traveling with his brother-in-law, who was an actor in comedies and a northern sympathizer. When his relative made some derogatory comments about Jefferson Davis, Booth physically attacked and almost killed him. There is no attempt to analyze these incidents in the context of Booth's life.

The editors were probably very successful in gathering all the extant Booth documents for this publication. They show that Booth was a successful actor with an ingratiating personality. They document that he was consumed by his pro-South fervor. They were not successful, however, in making Booth into a sympathetic historical figure who should be seen simply a product of his times. They contend that Booth is another in a long line of people who have assassinated leaders for political reasons. There is no doubt about this, but it is not enough to explain the final act of Booth's life. There were many people who both loved the South and hated Lincoln. Many of these people emigrated after the war rather than live in their defeated land. Surely Booth realized that after the capture of Richmond and the surrender of Robert E. Lee, the war was over. Assassinating Lincoln did nothing to help the South's war effort. So why did John Wilkes Booth undertake this political crime? Unfortunately neither his writings nor the commentary of the editors shed much light on this question.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact <h-net@h-net.msu.edu>.

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

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

Citation: Bruce Turner. Review of Rhodehamel, John; Taper, Louise, eds., *"Right or Wrong, God Judge Me": The Writings of John Wilkes Booth*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. July, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2184>

Copyright © 1998 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.