

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William C. Edwards, Edward Steers Jr., eds. *The Lincoln Assassination: The Evidence*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. xxxii + 1454 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03368-1.

Andrew C. A. Jampoler. *The Last Lincoln Conspirator: John Surratt's Flight from the Gallows*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008. xii + 312 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59114-407-6.

Kate Clifford Larson. *The Assassin's Accomplice: Mary Surratt and the Plot to Kill Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Basic Books, 2008. 288 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-03815-2.

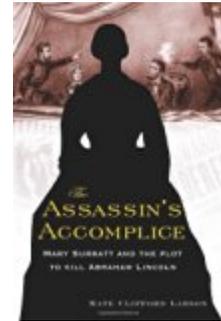
Anthony S. Pitch. *"They Have Killed Papa Dead!" The Road to Ford's Theatre, Abraham Lincoln's Murder, and the Rage for Vengeance*. Hanover: Steerforth Press, 2008. 512 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58642-158-8.

Edward Steers Jr., Harold Holzer. *The Lincoln Assassination Conspirators: Their Confinement and Execution, As Recorded in the Letterbook of John Frederick Hartranft*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. Illustrations. 179 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3396-5.

Reviewed by Carol Bundy (Independent Scholar)

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Lincoln's Assassination: The Facts and the Celebrity

In 2009, the bicentennial of President Abraham Lincoln's birth occasioned the publication of many books about one of our greatest presidents. Under review here are five books on his assassination. Each is exhaustive and authoritative on its chosen subject. Two look narrowly at Mary Surratt and her son, John Surratt, respectively, and will appeal to assassination buffs as well as students of assassination studies. Two publish primary source material. Of these, the shortest at 179 pages, *The Lincoln Assassination Conspirators* focuses exclusively on the confinement and execution of the Lincoln conspirators through the letterbook of the man who oversaw both, John Frederick Hartranft. At the other end of the spectrum is the comprehensive (at nearly 1,500 pages) *The Lincoln Assassination*. This documentary publication is of unquestioned value for Lincoln and assassina-

tion scholars. *"They Have Killed Papa Dead!"* is a thoroughly researched and remarkably well-told chronicle of Lincoln's assassination, and is the only book for the lay reader.

The Lincoln Assassination is the most complete record of the evidence published. Two transcriptions of the trial appeared in 1865. The first was produced by Benn Pitman, the man hired to record the trial, who reduced his 5,000 pages of shorthand to a 421-page volume that, while abridged, is regarded as accurate. Benjamin Perley Poore also published verbatim the daily transcripts of the trial as reported in the *Washington National Intelligencer* producing a three-volume set lacking an index and replicating the original misspellings. What this new volume contains that the earlier books do not is the evidence not

used at trial. Since 1865, this material had been treated as secret with access extremely limited until the 1930s, when the collection was technically opened. Not until the 1960s, when the National Archives microfilmed the collection, did scholars really begin to use it. This publication, under the skillful editorship of William C. Edwards and Edward Steers Jr., will now bring the entire collection to the broader scholarly community, and it is safe to assume that Lincoln assassination studies will see a fertile period as scholars mine this material. Useful footnotes, careful annotation, and a well-designed page make this volume a pleasure to use. Particularly helpful are the citations that link the documents to their place in the archive, informing the reader whether it was published previously as part of Pitman's or Poore's publications and whether it was used in the trial for the prosecution and/or the defense. The variety of material is breathtaking and immediately gives a sense of the richness and range of its potential use for scholars.

One is also able to appreciate how daunting the prospect of preparing for the trial must have been. Everything is included, from the most vital evidence of conspiracy to crackpot theories and simply heartsick grief. But even setting aside material entirely useless in a court of law, it is striking that although in possession of the evidence, the government simply could not process all of it, and various conspirators went undetected. Additionally, far more evidence of the conspirators' guilt appears in this collection than ever emerged in court. (This circumstance suggests the archive's relevance as historical context for understanding our contemporary difficulty in analyzing—even recognizing—the significance of gathered intelligence.)

The other important primary source under review is Hartranft's letterbook published now for the first time. Two Lincoln scholars, Steers (also an editor for the previous book) and Harold Holzer, joined forces with the National Archives to transcribe the letterbook and publish it with an accompanying essay of some fifty-nine pages. This essay provides much of the background to help us interpret the terse letterbook, which uses the language of military orders, circulars, reports, etc. By focusing on the treatment of the prisoners in jail, both before and after their conviction, larger moral questions are set within confined and remarkably concrete parameters. Through the spare details of their diet, their sleeping habits, and their basic health, the reader is offered a glimpse into the psyches of the conspirators as they prepared for death.

Holzer and Steers do a thorough job of providing rel-

evant context. An added bonus are the pages of illustrations. There are portraits of the defendants, key judges, prosecutors, tribunal members, and relevant political figures; a floor plan of the trial room; and photographs of the prison, its staff, the scaffold, and the hanging of four of the conspirators. This small book leads us through the execution and all its grisly details. Despite the tone of their impartial jailor's official correspondence, the essential horror and the humanity of the conspirators is particularly evident. The focus of the letterbook comes to rest on Mary Surratt. The assumption was that she would be pardoned on account of her sex. She was not.

Kate Clifford Larson started work on *The Assassin's Accomplice* presuming that Mary Surratt was innocent. Larson was interested in whether her story could better be understood when the fact of her gender was considered. She gives us a biographical view of Surratt, showing the confines of her life, its meager choices, and its bad luck. Sympathy accrues to Surratt for her misfortunes in the early phase of her life—neglectful parents, a bad marriage, the failure of her family to assist her in managing an alcoholic and abusive husband, and her valiant efforts to rise above the legacy of debt left by that husband's premature demise. Necessity and limited options help explain why Surratt worked in the Confederate underground. There is a suggestion that she had, like her daughter, fallen under the spell of the handsome actor. But Larson is careful to give Surratt full agency for her treason, and portrays her as squarely committed to her part in John Wilkes Booth's conspiracy. Surratt was active in the final phase of the plot as Booth changed his plans from kidnap to assassination, privy to his secrets, carrying out his wishes, and proving his most helpful aide. Despite her initial presumptions, Larson concludes that Surratt was guilty. She is convincing in arguing that Surratt, who had worked to earn Booth's confidence, was one of the few people he fully informed of his plan. (As we know from *The Lincoln Assassination* there was, in fact, even more evidence of her guilt than was presented at trial.) Larson is particularly good when handling Surratt's arrogant behavior toward the police during the interrogation and the trial. Surratt believed that she could stonewall; perhaps her motive was to protect her son, and certainly she assumed that as a woman she was safe. Her ultimate collapse just before her execution was affecting if only because it confirms what an act of courage and nerve it had been to steel herself up until that point.

The American public was outraged at the execution of a woman, even an assassin's accomplice, and the belief that Surratt had been innocent quickly began to gain

currency. Larson's book puts such claims in context. It is thoroughly researched, well written, and will doubtless stand as the last word on Surratt for some time. The only drawback with this work is that the ground covered by Larson as she details the development of the conspiracy is covered again as she describes the trial. This redundancy slows the pace of the book.

Surratt's son, John Surratt, was a Booth kidnapping conspirator as well as a spy, courier, and general factotum for the Confederacy. In *The Last Lincoln Conspirator*, Andrew C. A. Jampoler writes fluently and entertainingly with an instinct for a good story. Jampoler follows Surratt Jr.'s journey from Elmira, New York, where he was at the time of the assassination, to Canada, and thence to Europe. Arriving in Alexandria, Egypt, Surratt was arrested and returned to Washington for trial. Lacking much documentation for Surratt's journey, Jampoler provides the reader with information on such topics as the Battle of Bull Run, steamship crossings of the Atlantic, the city of Liverpool (including a biographical squib of one of the artists that painted its cityscapes), the use of Zouave units, papal history and policy, and the not inconsiderable back story on the ancient city of Alexandria. On page 141, Surratt is apprehended and taken into American custody. After this point, a definitive record of him and his movements allows his story to take and keep center stage.

In the last half of the book, Jampoler tells the tale of Surratt's trial, the hung jury, and Surratt's release from jail. Although a conspirator in Booth's kidnapping plan, Surratt was not a participant in the assassination plot, and he was away from the District of Columbia at the time of its execution. Given this stubborn fact, the case against him was framed badly, and the charges misplaced. What pressures pushed the government into bringing these charges and pursuing this case despite its obvious limitations? Sadly, Jampoler does not tackle this question. Instead he explores whether Surratt could have received a fair trial in the District of Columbia and speculates on the behavior of his defense lawyers as well as the strategy of the prosecution. This approach seems a bit like flogging a dead horse. More important, Jampoler misses an opportunity to explore how the trial played into the larger mood of the country.

Jampoler is a great raconteur, but certain quirks in his style lead to questions concerning his authorial authority. For instance, he explains that the charges against the eight conspirators were "filed by a government that needed revenge the way its home city needed food and

water" (p. 26). Mary Surratt is referred to as "Powell's familiar" (p. 33). This relationship of witch and familiar or animal shaped servant seems all wrong, or at the very least reversed with Surratt as the witch and Powell as her familiar, but nothing in Jampoler's book suggests they had so linked a relationship. Discussing one of the witnesses in the earlier trial, Jampoler explains "Reed was wrong or lying, which amounts to the same thing" (p. 49). But it does not: one is perjury, the other is not. Suffice to say that if in the first half of the book Jampoler offers too much detail, in the second half, the absence of context is evident. When precision and fact are required, Jampoler offers summation and imprecision.

These are small points, but at times, Jampoler's lack of precision undermines his representation of history. When Jampoler contrasts Surratt's civil trial with the early trial of other conspirators, he describes that earlier trial as "some improvised tribunal based on an Army general order about the laws of war" (p. 161). Here is where some background information would have been helpful. In another instance, Jampoler describes how it was the view of a Yankee newspaper readership that Washington was "an irredeemably southern city populated by men of doubtful loyalty to the Union" (p. 162). Yet throughout the book, Jampoler confirms this view of the city by describing the ease with which Surratt and other Confederate couriers and spies not only were able to pass among the citizens of the District and its environs, but also find succor in most quarters. In fact, there is general agreement within the scholarly community that the citizens of Washington and much of southern Maryland were indeed sympathetic to the South.^[1] Rather than treating this fact as Yankee prejudice, Jampoler might have explored Washington's peculiar status as well as its relationship to its neighboring slaveholding states and its large population of free African Americans. Surely if a history of the Zouaves is valuable to the Surratt story, a bit of background on Washington would have been even more useful. Nonetheless Jampoler has given us an entertaining, if not exhaustive, account of Surratt and his role as one of the conspirators to assassinate President Lincoln.

Assassination buffs will appreciate all of the four books discussed thus far. For a more general reader who would like a balanced, well-written, well-researched book on the assassination that manages to put it all in context, Anthony Pitch's *"They Have Killed Papa Dead!"* is an excellent choice. The subtitle, *The Road to Ford's Theatre, Abraham Lincoln's Murder, and the Rage for Vengeance*, better reflects the substance of the book,

which starts with Lincoln's arrival in Washington in 1861 and immediately makes the point that for Lincoln the presidency and threats of assassination were always linked. As Pitch moves all the players—Lincoln, the other victims, and the conspirators—toward the evil day, the reader is able to appreciate the vast difference between their separate journeys. Pitch nestles Lincoln's response to the threat of his own possible death within the larger picture, of which Lincoln was profoundly aware, of the death and tragedy of war. In doing so, Pitch exposes the living Lincoln as he wrestled with his fears of mortality, with the desire to preserve himself, and with what he perceived as the demands of his office. In this regard, it is a relief to have Lincoln return to center stage. This perspective allows the reader to experience again his assassination as a tragedy.

Pitch also helps us understand the conspirators. Booth and his obsession with the Southern cause are placed within the context of his family and his fame as an actor. We watch Booth grow increasingly desperate and erratic. Pitch adroitly shows the changes in how he interacted with the world at large. Indeed as each of the eight conspirators bounce off of the “nonconspiratorial” world, their fragility—emotional, ideological, and financial—becomes increasingly evident. This approach also gives pathos and depth to subsidiary actors. The

overpowering of the Seward family is vividly drawn, and the horror of that attack is freshly shocking. Edwin Stanton's role, taking charge during those days, no longer seems an odd random event. Mary Lincoln's erratic behavior gains meaning. With a masterly control of the material and the, by now, extensive cast of characters, Pitch moves us past the assassination, the capture of the conspirators, their trial, and then eventually to the hung jury in the John Surratt trial. His journey is the depressing descent from high Shakespearean tragedy (“Now he belongs to the ages”) to the reptilian banalities of petty cruelty, abuse of power, false charges, and opportunistic paranoia. What is remarkable is that despite this long journey, Pitch manages to convince us that its entire breadth can be contained within our capital city, the District of Columbia.

Note

[1]. William J. Evitts, *A Matter of Allegiances: Maryland from 1850 to 1861* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Ernest B. Furgurson, *Freedom Rising: Washington in the Civil War* (New York: Random House, 2004); Margaret Leech, *Reveille in Washington* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941); and James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 284-290.

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