

H-Net Reviews

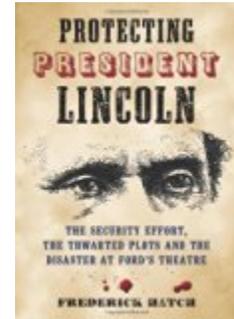
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frederick Hatch. *Protecting President Lincoln: The Security Effort, the Thwarted Plots and the Disaster at Ford's Theatre.* Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2011. vii + 200 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-6362-6.

Reviewed by Mark Neels (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville)

Published on H-CivWar (April, 2012)

Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson



A Macabre Fascination: Historians and the Lincoln Assassination

The discipline of “Lincolnia” has, in recent years, produced unprecedented levels of scholarship. From biographies of his individual cabinet members, to literary studies of his most famous speeches, to chronicles of the macabre odyssey involving his corpse, it seems that every year scholars produce new research on almost every facet of the life of the sixteenth president of the United States. Of particular interest to scholars and Civil War buffs alike, over the last sixty years, have been the occurrences surrounding Lincoln’s murder in April, 1865. The historiography of this topic stretches back almost to the day that Lincoln died. Even more, over the last quarter century, alone, no less than eight full-length treatments have been published regarding this singular event. The first attempt at a scholarly examination of the assassination might possibly belong to Lloyd Lewis’s 1929 *The Assassination of Lincoln: History and Myth*, but Jim Bishop’s 1955 *The Day Lincoln Was Shot* rightly deserves the title of the most popular version of this story. In more recent times, however, accounts of the assassination have been released at an impressive rate. William Hanchett’s 1983 *The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies*, and Edward Steers Jr.’s more recent *Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (2005) examined the numerous conspiracies to kill the president, while Michael Kauffman’s *American Brutus* (2004) provided the most recent and thorough biography of the assassin himself.

Approaching Lincoln’s bicentennial in 2009, works were issued in even greater numbers. The same year

as Kauffman’s book, Elizabeth Leonard released *Lincoln’s Avengers* (2004), which—along with Edward Steers Jr.’s *The Trial* (2003)—is an excellent account of the trial of the assassins in the late spring and summer of 1865. In 2006, James Swanson’s *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln’s Killer* gave an account of the search by federal troops for John Wilkes Booth that is so dramatic in its narrative that it gave Hollywood’s *The Fugitive* (1993) a run for its money. Swanson’s 2010 *Bloody Crimes: The Chase for Jefferson Davis and the Death Pageant for Lincoln’s Corpse* examined the other federal manhunt occurring in the days following the assassination, and serves as an excellent companion piece to his earlier work. And in 2008, another conspirator, Mary Surratt, was highlighted in Kate Larson’s *The Assassin’s Accomplice*, which subsequently became the basis for Robert Redford’s 2011 film *The Conspirator*.

Furthermore, this list of works is not exhaustive! Indeed, even more titles come to mind that, at one level or another, touch upon the Lincoln assassination. For instance, one of the most recent works, Nora Titone’s 2010 *My Thoughts Be Bloody*, expands upon Kauffman’s examination of John Wilkes Booth by focusing on the tumultuous relationship between John and his brother, Edwin, and the impact that this family feud had on John’s deeds at Ford’s Theatre. Several primary-source collections have also recently been published, including *The Lincoln Assassination Conspirators: Their Confinement and Execution, as Recorded in the Letterbook of John Freder-*

ick Hartranft (2009), edited by Edward Steers Jr. and Harold Holzer, and *The Lincoln Assassination: The Evidence* (2009), edited by William C. Edwards and Edward Steers Jr. Even television personality Bill O'Reilly has weighed in on the topic, with his 2011 *Killing Lincoln: The Shocking Assassination that Changed America Forever*.

With so much already said about this event, then, the challenge is to discover new avenues of research from which to add to the already extensive scholarship. In *Protecting President Lincoln: The Security Effort, the Thwarted Plots and the Disaster at Ford's Theatre*, Frederick Hatch acknowledges this challenge, and seeks to examine the death of President Lincoln by highlighting the daunting task of protecting the nation's chief executive during the greatest crisis in American history.

An examination of Hatch's credentials suggests that he is well read in the evidence surrounding Lincoln's assassination. According to both his publisher, as well as a listing of speakers at the 2012 Conference of the Surratt House Museum, he is the writer, editor, and publisher of the *Journal of the Lincoln Assassination*, which he founded in 1987. As well, he has contributed to the *Lincoln Herald*, *Sea Classics*, *American History*, *Surratt Courier*, and *Walt Whitman—An Encyclopedia*. This list of credentials, however, suggests that this book is his first attempt at a full-length nonfiction account of the assassination, and, unfortunately, I believe that it falls short of contributing much in the way of new information on an otherwise well-examined subject.

Abraham Lincoln's assassination came as a shock to a nation numb from the constant presence of death and war during the late Civil War. However, what made it a shock was not that the death of an incumbent president was unprecedented—Lincoln was, after all, the third sitting president to die in office, and the second to die within a fifteen-year period. What made his death so shocking was the manner in which it occurred, for Lincoln was the first president to be murdered. Yet even this fact should not have been entirely surprising to Lincoln's family and friends. As some of his friends remembered, Lincoln was sometimes preoccupied with mysterious dreams and portents, which he often took as a sign of his own imminent demise. And although associates of the president often brushed these eerie warnings off as the workings of an over-active imagination, it is nonetheless surprising that, as Hatch attempts to show, more of an effort was not made to increase the president's protection during a time when the president's life was more threatened than at any other time in American history.

Hatch's book, instead of focusing on any one aspect of the Lincoln assassination, provides a general overview of the various facets of this event. Subjects briefly examined include biographies of Lincoln, Booth, and the several conspirators; an overview of the causes of the Civil War, as well as the evolution of Booth's plot from a plan to kidnap the president to a conspiracy to murder him; and even a review of the odyssey of Lincoln's corpse from the time of his death to the moment that concrete was poured over his casket, sealing the president away from public view for all ages. The strongest part of the book, in fact, happens to be a chapter entitled "The Missing Guard," which provides a discussion of Lincoln's security detail on the night of the assassination, in which Hatch reveals the unreliable character of Lincoln's bodyguard, John F. Parker. While he accompanied Lincoln to the theatre that night, Hatch observed, Parker clearly did not remain at his post in front of the presidential box, thus inadvertently leaving Lincoln vulnerable. In this chapter, Hatch asks very compelling questions. Why wasn't Parker at his post? Where did he go? And, why wasn't he asked to testify at the trial of the conspirators? Likewise, Hatch's examination of sources is strongest in this section of the book, in that he fairly weighs the pros and cons of relying on sources written decades after the events they describe.

Aside from the reminiscences of those closest to Lincoln during the Civil War years, very little ink has been spilled on the topic of the security detail assigned to the president during the war. True, several recent television documentaries (the History Channel's *The Hunt for John Wilkes Booth*, and *Stealing Lincoln's Body* immediately come to mind) have sought to at least mention this lesser-known facet of the assassination story. And one recent book, Michael Kline's *The Baltimore Plot* (2008), provides the first full-length account in nearly forty years of the earliest attempt to assassinate the president. But, to my knowledge, no single volume before Hatch's work has attempted to make the issue of security the centerpiece of its narrative. To this end, I eagerly expected Hatch to provide new insights on how the many attempts on Lincoln's life were thwarted by the likes of Alan Pinkerton, Ward Hill Lamon, and other men. Instead, Hatch only succeeds in addressing the question of why Lincoln was so miserably guarded the night of April 14, 1865. The reader turns from the chapter on "The Missing Guard," then, hoping that the rest of the book will be as strong, but is disappointed by the otherwise lack of focus on the main issue of Lincoln's security.

This criticism aside, there are still some gems that

will—if nothing else—raise eyebrows among Lincoln scholars. Aside from the above-mentioned chapter, perhaps the greatest strengths of Hatch's work are the interesting discussion about the supposedly light security detail at the White House, in which he argues that quite a bit more protection was provided for Lincoln than originally thought, and the biographical sketch of John Wilkes Booth. Still, most of this information can be found in

greater detail in other sources, such as Kauffman's *American Brutus* and Titone's *My Thoughts Be Bloody*. Ultimately, while the book may be useful to the general reader with little or no knowledge of this topic, the fact that it lacks a clear argument means that it will not be particularly valuable to historians seeking a greater understanding of Lincoln's assassination.

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

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

Citation: Mark Neels. Review of Hatch, Frederick, *Protecting President Lincoln: The Security Effort, the Thwarted Plots and the Disaster at Ford's Theatre*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. April, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35192>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.