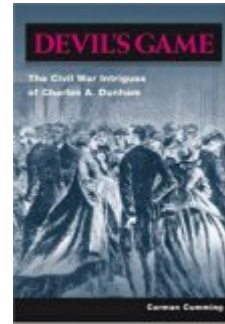


Carman Cumming. *Devil's Game: The Civil War Intrigues of Charles A. Dunham*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004. xiii + 305 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02890-8.

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A Civil War Spy and His Post-War Intrigues

Charles Dunham was one of the more unpleasant characters during the American Civil War. Carman Cumming, in his book *Devil's Game: The Civil War Intrigues of Charles A. Dunham*, describes Dunham as an “astonishingly clever and prolific fraud,” and as an “enormously inventive, imaginative, daring scoundrel” (pp. 8-9). He was without a doubt a fraud, although the use of terms such as clever, inventive, imaginative, and scoundrel suggest more romance and derring-do than is probably warranted. Dunham was a man with few scruples who invariably acted in his own interest no matter whose life he endangered or ruined. Cumming’s book provides the first attempt to fully flesh out this man who played a minor, but important, role in the war and a much more important function in the immediate post-war period.

Cumming explores Dunham’s civil war career from his early attempts at spying to the role that he played following the war in the trials of Lincoln’s assassins. During the war, Dunham assumed numerous identities including that of “Colonel” James Watson Wallace, “Colonel” George Margrave, and, his most famous, Sandford Conover. He traveled from the Union to Virginia on several occasions as well as to Vermont and Canada making contact with officials on both the Union and Confederate sides as he collected information on troop movements and strategic plans. At one point he suggested to Lincoln a ploy to capture Jefferson Davis. Still later in the war he wrote articles for the *New York Tribune*, *Herald*, and *World* newspapers. Cumming provides much new information on Confederate efforts in Canada and Dun-

ning’s involvement in them.

Dunham was an adept liar, and consequently the modern historian has a great deal of difficulty discerning what in his life was true and what sources are reliable. His writings, while often compelling in the amount of detail they provided on southern life and the Confederacy, were ultimately, according to Cumming, “thoroughly unreliable” (p. 80), and he himself was “a model of cynical exploitation” (p. 123). Notoriously slippery, Dunham worked hard to cover his tracks and to mislead his associates as well as his later biographers. Cumming nonetheless manages to unravel many of Dunham’s different identities and effectively demonstrates the part he played in producing northern propaganda about the situation in the south. He explores Dunham’s exploits with a thoroughness and persistence that is admirable.

Unfortunately, for all Cumming’s hard work, much remains mysterious including Dunham’s true allegiance to either the Confederacy or the Union and his personal motivations for his actions. While Cumming makes some informed guesses on these issues—he suggests that he worked for the Union—he does so only occasionally, choosing instead to lay out in intricate and sometimes confusing detail all of Dunham’s various dealings. The uninitiated reader needs to pay careful attention in order to wade through the morass of Dunham’s intrigues.

It is in his postwar activities that Dunham’s life takes on a broader significance for historians. At the end of the war, Joseph Holt, Judge Advocate of the United States and head of the Bureau of Military Justice, used Dunham

as his star witness against George Atzerodt, Mary Surratt, and the others accused in the Lincoln assassination conspiracy, which resulted in the executions of four of them. Dunham also provided critical testimony in the ultimately unsuccessful attempt to link Jefferson Davis to the assassination. When Dunham's own perjury came to light, he was tried and ultimately convicted in a trial that Cumming aptly describes as edging into "an Alice-in-Wonderland world" (p. 204). Dunham's activities did not, however, end with his conviction. In an attempt to win his freedom, Dunham first attempted to implicate President Andrew Johnson in the conspiracy and when that failed turned against Holt and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton to suggest that they had deliberately encouraged false testimony for their own political ends.

If it were not for his role at the end of the war, Dunham could be dismissed as a minor player who, for all his madcap schemes, had little impact on the overall direction of the war. The most interesting questions involving Dunham surround the assassin trials, and Holt and Stanton's willingness to use him in their quest to avenge

Lincoln's death and to implicate Jefferson Davis in the conspiracy, even after they knew Dunham had fabricated much of his testimony. The events following Lincoln's assassination, including the resulting trials, demonstrate all of the passions, rivalries, and stakes at play within the federal government at that critical juncture in time. Cumming sets out in great detail the day-by-day progression of the trials, including Dunham's own, in fascinating detail. But the reader is left always wanting more and is frustrated at the impossibility of really understanding this man and the motivations for his actions. For a broader view of the Lincoln's trials that provides an impressive complement to Cumming's book, readers should also consult Elizabeth Leonard's recent work *Lincoln's Avengers: Justice, Revenge and Reunion after the Civil War* (2004).

If the forest sometimes gets lost amid the trees, *Devil's Game* nonetheless provides new insights on spying during the war and is a useful addition to the literature on the complex political maneuverings in Washington at the end of the war.

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