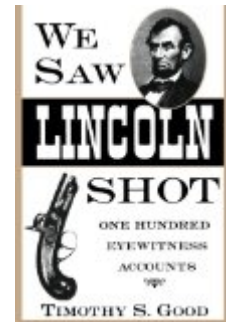


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Timothy S. Good, ed. *We Saw Lincoln Shot: One Hundred Eyewitness Accounts*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995. viii + 215 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87805-778-8; \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87805-779-5.

Reviewed by Beverly Wilson Palmer (Thaddeus Stevens Papers)  
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Since its occurrence on April 14, 1865, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, like that of John F. Kennedy in this century, has transfixed and perplexed Americans. One of the first, if not the first, film reenactments occurred as a segment in *Birth of a Nation*. More recently, in his novel *Henry and Clara*, Thomas A. Mallon depicted the murder as experienced by the young couple sitting in the presidential box at Ford's Theatre when John Wilkes Booth fired his derringer at Lincoln's head. Timothy S. Good's compilation of one hundred eyewitness accounts of the sensational event illustrates the continuing inconsistencies surrounding Lincoln's death and emphasizes the unreliability of witnesses' accounts as time passes.

Good's well-organized book is preceded by an excellent overview in which he narrates the events of April 14-15 from about 10:30 a.m. on April 14, when the managers at Ford's Theatre learned that the presidential party would attend *Our American Cousin*, to 7:22 the following morning, when Lincoln died. In his overview, Good, a National Park Ranger, carefully weighs conflicting evidence and reaches convincing conclusions as to which sources are most reliable, what really happened, and what will be forever debatable. The following four sections are organized in chronological order: letters, diaries, and testimony recorded in April and May 1865; testimony delivered at the conspiracy trial held in May 1865; letters and newspaper articles written between 1877 and 1908; and accounts, mostly reminiscences in newspaper articles, from 1909 to 1954. The book has helpful diagrams of the dress circle, orchestra, and backstage at Ford's Theatre. Good's headnotes to the accounts provide the location, when known, of each eyewitness in the theater and usually some information about the witness's reliability.

A little more information about, at least, the region in which these eyewitnesses lived would help the reader to understand the accounts better. Although some of them, particularly the actors and stage hands, are briefly identified, most are not. For example, Edwin Bates, writing to his parents on April 15, is concerned about the future of Reconstruction in the wake of Lincoln's death: "His conciliatory policy I am satisfied although distasteful to the radicals & perhaps a majority of the people was the surest & quickest road to peace" (p. 36). He says he will soon be heading South. To what state? Bates appears to be a Southern unionist; if no further biographical information is readily available, at least the location of his addressee would enable us to weigh his comments. Bates was accompanied by Frederick A. Sawyer. Is this the same Sawyer who represented South Carolina in the U.S. Senate 1868-73? If he is, just a little research could have uncovered this significant information.

Although Good provides no description of his transcription policy, his transcription of what are apparently handwritten and newspaper accounts seems sound; he reproduces errors in punctuation, spelling and grammar (e.g. p. 33) and indicates ("[indecipherable]") when words are illegible. I wonder, however, about the ellipses; what has been omitted? and why? If a printed text, did Good abridge it, or did some previous editor?

For a book claiming to provide accuracy and to clear up contradictions, *We Saw Lincoln Shot* could have benefited from closer editing and proofreading. For example, similar testimony from Will T. Kent and William T. Kent is provided on pages 44 and 85, yet he is treated as two different people (though as one in the index); on page 44 his location in the theater is given, but on page 85 it

is listed as “unknown.” William J. Ferguson appears to be one of the actors that night from his own testimony (p. 170) or, from another actor’s account, a prompter (p. 162) but is vaguely described by Good as being “assigned backstage” (p. 169).

Another minor flaw is repetition. Some of the accounts, particularly by the same person (the obituary of Mrs. Nelson Todd, pp. 176-77; Jacob Soles, pp. 180-81), could have been omitted. Were there no others from such leading participants as the actress Laura Keene? Some of the inclusions do not measure up to Good’s statement in the preface that he has chosen “only those that provide substantial information” (p. viii).

In *We Saw Lincoln Shot*, certain realities become clear: Booth’s theatrics, even as he murdered the president; Mary Lincoln’s anguish upon learning her husband had been shot; the admiration of the audience for the president and its horror upon learning what had transpired. Likewise, as Good intends, the contradictory or embellished accounts point up the impossibility of determining for certain all the details of the night of April 14. For

example, two people, William Kent (p. 85) and W. H. Taylor (p. 121), claimed to have retrieved Booth’s pistol and turned it over to the police. Many claim to have carried the mortally wounded Lincoln across Tenth Street to the Petersen house. Beginning in 1924, several stated that he or she was the last surviving witness to the assassination. We learn here how certain myths, like the one that Booth broke his leg when he jumped from the box onto the stage, became part of history. When I looked up the account of Lincoln’s assassination in the most recent *Encyclopedia Britannica* (15th edition), I was surprised and appalled to read that Booth “had grappled briefly with a patron”—not Lincoln’s theater companion that night, Major Henry Rathbone, as is made clear in *We Saw Lincoln Shot*—and that he jumped onto the stage “breaking a bone in the lower portion of his left leg” (2:375). Booth’s biographer should read this book.

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