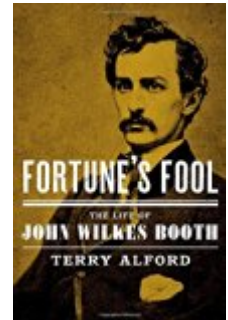


Terry Alford. *Fortune's Fool: The Life of John Wilkes Booth.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 454 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-505412-5.



Reviewed by Brian C. Miller

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Commissioned by Lisa A. Francavilla (The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series and Jefferson Quotes & Family Letters)

The assassination of Abraham Lincoln remains a hot topic within the realm of Civil War publishing. Over the last decade, numerous titles have chronicled multiple dimensions of the events leading up to April 14, 1865, and beyond. Readers have seen everything from scholarly monographs by Edward Steers and edited collections by Harold Holzer to a page-turner in James Swanson's *Manhunt* to even television commentator Bill O'Reilly's error-riddled *Killing Lincoln* (which ended up as a television movie starring Jesse Johnson as the famed assassin).[1] Conspiracy theorists continue to delve into each and every morsel of detail surrounding the plot to execute several government officials, to the point where the Internet may soon need a server the size of Ford's Theater to hold them all. Booth's ghost looms large over the president, as evidenced by a controversy that exploded when the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum in Springfield, Illinois, included a wax figure of the assassin among other important figures in Lincoln's life (and

guests could depart with a Booth bobble-head from the gift shop until management yanked them in 2012).

Yet, even in the midst of so much attention to the assassination, the assassin himself has never had a full-length scholarly biography. Thankfully, Terry Alford has risen to the challenge and has produced an excellent biography that explores John Wilkes Booth from birth to burial, with an epilogue that even samples some of the lunacy intertwined with numerous conspiracy theories. Alford's task certainly required an extensive amount of research, as Booth does not have a repository of papers, stemming from a lack of interest in writing or chronicling many personal details. Thus, in order to reconstruct Booth's life, Alford has mined the letters, diaries, and newspaper articles written by the men and women who knew Booth as a son, neighbor, lover, colleague, performer, Confederate champion, plotter, and murderer. The depth of research and wide variety of viewpoints allow for a complex portrait to

emerge of a man who was admired and respected, but showed signs from time to time that he was indeed capable of performing one of the most dastardly acts in American History.

Alford offers several fascinating insights into the early life of John Wilkes Booth that would fill any psychiatrist's notebook. His father showed signs of madness, as he drank, contemplated suicide, and served jail time for several bouts of attempted murder. The son ended up mired in a host of strange contradictions. On one hand, he loved dogs and horses and even assaulted a man who whipped a horse. On the other hand, he tortured and killed cats around the Baltimore home-stead, which modern psychologists would argue makes Booth more like Dexter Morgan than Laurence Olivier. As he grew to adulthood, Booth discovered his love for the stage and, as Alford shows, relished the applause. Yet, when John Brown failed in his attempted slave rebellion at Harpers Ferry in 1859 and was sentenced to death, Booth decided to join the men who heeded the call of Virginia's governor for the militia to ensure that Brown headed to the gallows unmolested. Booth served as a sergeant in the regimental quartermaster's department, which resulted in his presence on the day of Brown's execution in Charlestown, Virginia, on December 2, 1859. The sight of the elderly abolitionist dangling from a noose visibly sickened Booth and he returned to Richmond, where the stage beckoned him once again.

As Alford explores Booth's life through the Civil War years, he again skillfully weaves various viewpoints that continue to peel away more layers of the complex would-be assassin. His contemporaries described him as attractive, active, and collegial, always considerate, charming, funny, and a pretty good actor, who certainly had the physique and work ethic to take on multiple roles. The praiseworthy sentiments offered about Booth clash with many post-assassination accounts that described Booth as "an opium addict, a sexual

predator, a home wrecker, a thief, a cutthroat, and a debauchee" (p. 144). While the negative descriptors may be a bit of a stretch, Booth nonetheless expressed his displeasure towards Abraham Lincoln and revealed his Confederate sympathies in private. Booth showed his hand to Samuel Arnold and Michael O'Laughlen one summer day in 1864, as the three men sat around drinking and raging against Grant's decision to halt the prisoner exchange system. Thus, the men would kidnap Lincoln and take him to Richmond, where he could be traded for numerous Confederate soldiers languishing in camps across the North.

In discussing the kidnapping and assassination plots, Alford offers a wealth of details centered squarely on Booth, which sets his work apart from other assassination monographs that tend to take several pages to explain the role of each of the accessory conspirators. To his credit, Alford admits when the historical record simply provides no details or evidence (for example, how Booth and Lewis Powell/Paine met) on notions that have long dominated some of the conspiracy tales woven about the men who plotted the demise of the government. Ultimately, in a bout of drunken anger, Booth changed the course of history by calling for murder over kidnapping. Alford offers several details into how Booth quickly put his plan into action and successfully shot Lincoln during a performance of *Our American Cousin* on Good Friday.

The biography concludes with Booth's escape out of the nation's capital and into Maryland and Virginia, before he found himself surrounded at the Garrett Farm. There, Boston Corbett, part of the detail pursuing the assassin, felt called by God to prevent Booth from escaping, let alone killing anyone else. Corbett shot Booth in the neck and the assassin perished a few hours later. However, for many conspirator theorists, Booth never died in Virginia. In popular Internet culture, he has become the nineteenth-century version of Elvis Presley, still alive for many decades traveling the

country and the world, from France and Japan to Oklahoma and Texas. Alford skillfully debunks all of the conspiracy hogwash, noting that such talk defies “common sense” (p. 334). He offers several accounts from those who transported the body or even attended the reburial in 1869 and accurately identified the remains. Additionally, in a vivid and graphic account, the author describes the condition of Booth’s decaying corpse, matched to dental records and the broken leg sustained from the awkward fall from the presidential box. Although Booth got a reburial, the legend of his survival persisted, to the point where carnival purveyors had multiple opportunities to see the skull of Booth (five versions traveled around the country) or even his alleged mummified remains.

Thus, Alford has produced a deeply and exhaustively researched monograph that offers a complex portrait of Booth drawn from those who knew him or at least thought they knew him. At the same time, the book contains a wealth of anecdotes and amusing notes that simply make it a wonderfully written biography of one of the most notorious figures in American history.

Note

[1]. Edward Steers Jr., *Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001); Harold Holzer, Craig L. Symonds, and Frank J. Williams, eds., *The Lincoln Assassination: Crime and Punishment, Myth and Memory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); James L. Swanson, *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln’s Killer* (New York: William Morrow, 2006); Bill O’Reilly and Martin Dugard, *Killing Lincoln: The Shocking Assassination that Changed America Forever* (New York: Holt, Henry, and Co., 2011).

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