

Book Reviews

Lincoln's Assassination

by: Edward Steers, Jr

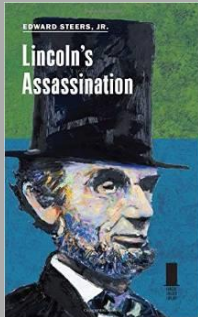
Southern Illinois University Press (2014)

The Assassin's Accomplice: Mary Surrant and the Plot to Kill Abraham Lincoln

by: Kate Clifford Larson

Basic Books (2008)

In many ways, including the fact that I read them one after the other, it seems altogether fitting to review these two books together. Not only do they complement one another very nicely but more importantly they provide an all-encompassing description of one of the most consequential but fascinating crimes in American history.

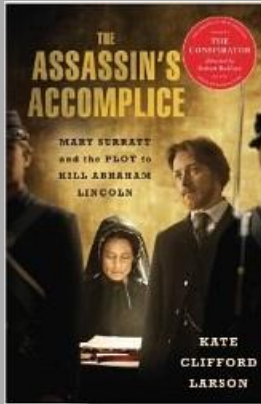


The Steers book, written by a scientist who has written several books about the assassination, deals with the entire back story of John Wilkes Booth and how he managed to recruit an entire team of accomplices, all of whom except Mary Surrant were men. Steers gives us short biographical sketches of Booth's helpers but obviously the story of Booth, and his motivations, are more extensive. Steers makes clear that Booth was not a deranged madman but instead was someone who had a clear, well developed plan for Lincoln's murder; however it might be fair to say that Booth's escape plan was not as detailed, especially after Booth broke a small bone in his leg as he leapt from the President's box.

There are not many revelations in Steers' book, which is well organized, clearly and concisely narrated, thus making it an extremely pleasurable read. However one aspect not generally known (at least to me) was the extent to which other conspiracies to capture and/or kill Lincoln existed. Most of the other plots were either connected or even sponsored by the Confederate government but Booth was undoubtedly a lone wolf. Initially he believed if he could kidnap Lincoln there would be value to the Southern cause to negotiate an exchange of prisoners but eventually Booth seemed to have been driven by a desire to avenge the Southern cause, including his attitude of White supremacy.

Although Steers does not mention Mary Surrant until past the mid-point of his book, and pays relatively scant attention to her throughout most of the rest of his book, Larson's entire book is devoted to Mary's background, including her family, especially her son John, her acquaintance with Booth and a

couple other members of the conspiracy. And while Steers maintains a distant, impersonal relationship with the conspiracy's participants, Larson develops a portrayal of Mary Surrant that is much more intimate and richly detailed. She freely admits that she began her book with the assumption that Mary Surrant was not guilty, or at least did not deserve to be hanged; while Larson eventually changed her mind about Mary's guilt, Larson remains sympathetic toward her subject.



Larson delves into the trial, as least as it related to Mary Surrant, much more deeply than does Steers. Larson provides some background about Mary Surrant's legal team and the numerous tactical mistakes committed by her inexperienced lawyers during the trial. Larson even goes into such details as Mary Surrant's attire worn during the length of the trial as well as her demeanor and bearing. Much of Larson's narrative describes a key witness, Louis Weichmann, once one of Mary's boarders and frequent companion. Without saying so in so many words, Larson plants the seed of the possibility that Weichmann might have himself been another conspirator but was not charged in exchange for turning state's evidence.

Both authors describe the prevailing atmosphere in Washington in the aftermath of the war and how those attitudes influenced the decision to conduct a trial by a military commission instead of by a civilian court. However neither author provides much information about the members of the military commission that conducted the trial, particularly whether they had prejudices that might have influenced their decisions. Larson notes that the prosecutors spent a good portion of the early part of the trial unsuccessfully attempting to link the assassination to Davis administration; furthermore the prosecution was allowed to introduce prejudicial matters such as the many abuses at Andersonville and other Southern prisons.

To choose only one of these well written, informative books is akin to having to pick only one flavor in an ice cream parlor. They are strikingly different from the each other but neither can, or should, be resisted. The solution of course is to try and to enjoy both. The reader will have twice the satisfaction of gaining information and insights without suffering any of the guilt.

Further information about Lincoln's assassination can be found at the link "[Assassination of Abraham Lincoln.](#)"