

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S LAST TWENTY-FOUR HOURS

Bishop, Jim. *The Day Lincoln Was Shot*. Harper & Brothers, Publishers, New York. Price \$3.75.

Just a decade from this week Thursday we will be observing the one hundredth anniversary of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Nevertheless, during all these many intervening years no book on the tragic ending of the martyred President has so captured the attention of the reading public as the story by Jim Bishop entitled *The Day Lincoln Was Shot*. It had no sooner reached the bookstalls than it jumped into the best seller class in non-fiction and now eight weeks later this "book of the month" selection still occupies a place near the top of the list.

The author will receive a warm welcome into the group of Lincoln authors because of the frank, unassuming manner he reveals. It is refreshing indeed to greet a writer who admits in his introduction: "I do not believe that this book presents all the facts nor anywhere near all the facts." He also makes frequent use throughout the book of the statement, "I don't know" and possibly most commendable of all, he does not by a process of using innuendo, indirectly point the finger of guilt at individuals who may have been under suspicion of complicity in the assassination plot.

Unless a reviewer be a veritable hound for errata, he is usually first impressed by the more favorable reactions he receives upon reading a new book. The selection of captions for the divisions of the story introduces one of the striking features of the publication, the time element. The first chapter is entitled "7 A.M." and the succeeding ones borrow the hourly citation around the clock twice until the twenty-four hours have been utilized in presenting the progressive events. However, there are two chapters included for creating atmosphere and orienting the story. The expression "time flies" might suggest the rapid movement of the text and the holding attention factor has been stimulated by the gradual approach to the fatal hour.

Possibly the outstanding contribution made by the author is the bringing together within specific periods of time certain people who participated in the events of the day. The importance of chronology is nowhere better illustrated than in this book. This is especially true with respect to the movements of John Wilkes Booth and with the background data presented Bishop will find most Lincoln students in agreement with him that the assassination plot was conceived by Booth and carried into execution by him with no support of any group outside the small clique which he brought together.

The late James G. Randall once prepared a monograph in which he inquired *Has the Lincoln Theme Been Exhausted?* to which question he made a negative answer. Bishop has illustrated how a seemingly threadbare subject such as the assassination of Lincoln, which has invited the attention of many authors, can be so treated by closely associating contemporary incidents that a fresh and constructive presentation is achieved. Randall's deep concern, however, twenty years ago, seems to have been whether or not the objective historian might be attracted to the field of Lincolniana. It must have given him much satisfaction to observe that outstanding Lincoln books in recent years have come from authors who might be called college trained historians.

Just now however, it appears as if the human interest writers are coming to the front again. Last year

Irving Stone's novel on Mary Lincoln which held first place as the best seller in fiction might be called the most widely read new book of the year. Following it closely, as one of the best sellers in the non-fiction field is the one volume *Abraham Lincoln* by our most popular Lincoln author, Carl Sandburg. Now while these two books still retain high sales rating, Bishop's entertaining book also comes into the best seller list to confirm the shifting emphasis to the more readable type of Lincoln literature.

Most authors give special attention to the opening and closing statements of their books but Mr. Bishop's first sentences and his last sentences fall short of the generally dependable tenor of the text. Bishop opens his argument in the first two paragraphs by introducing the President at 7 a.m. of the fatal day. With respect to Mr. Lincoln's manner of walking the author states, "the legs perpetually bent at the knees . . . the feet moved with conscious effort barely lifting off the red pile rug before being set down." We do not believe that the "perpetually bent knees" and the Herndonian recorded shuffle give a true picture of how Lincoln appeared in moving from one place to another.

In the closing two paragraphs of the argument after mentioning Lincoln's son Tad, Mr. Bishop tells the story of another little boy of history "whose name is lost to anonymity." The boy in question, under the spell of the incidents occurring on the day of Lincoln's death, looked up into the sky that evening and "could not believe that the stars were out." But as nearly every Lincoln student knows, the boy in the famous star gazing story is not anonymous, but his name was Elbert Hubbard and the episode is recorded in Hubbard's essay "Abe Lincoln and Nancy Hanks."

The reproduction of original photographs used in the book are excellent but the orientation pictures are not so satisfactory. There are still available several contemporary photographs showing the exterior of Ford's Opera House on Tenth Street, one especially taken while the building was draped in mourning. However, the likeness utilized in the Bishop book is reproduced from a photograph made many years later after the building was remodeled. It fails to show Taltavul's Saloon next door as it appeared when Booth took his bracer there just before the assassination. A. Berghaus who made his drawings of the theatre box and furniture by actual observation and his sketches of the occupants from descriptions by eye witnesses, released through *Leslie's Weekly* the most authentic portrayal of the box and its occupants. The furniture including the chair in which Lincoln was seated is presented in detail in a later issue, and the sofa on which Major Rathbone sat, as well as the wearing apparel of the women are in keeping with the best information on the subject. The *Harper's Weekly* picture reproduced in the Bishop book falls far short by comparison.

Historians will be greatly surprised to find lacking in Bishop's bibliography the names of two authors whose works on the assassination have been recognized everywhere as outstanding. There is no mention of the two books by Otto Eisenschiml "Why Was Lincoln Murdered" and "In the Shadow of Lincoln's Death." The scholarly objective study by George S. Bryan entitled "The Great American Myth" is ignored, but notwithstanding some significant omissions and a few inaccuracies, the book will rank as the best journalistic story of the assassination.