Review

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The basis for Robert Redford’s film *The Conspirator* (2010), Kate Clifford Larson’s *The Assassin’s Accomplice* is a lively and well-written investigation of Mary Surratt’s involvement in the Lincoln assassination. Like much of the assassination literature, the book benefits from a familiar story that lends itself to a healthy amount of lurid conjecture. The facts we know about the assassination and the things we can only piece together allow Larson a great deal of leeway in examining the question of Surratt’s guilt. This is often a good thing, as it allows Larson to pose interesting questions about Surratt’s relationship with John Wilkes Booth and the other accused accomplices.

For instance, Larson wonders why Mary Surratt decided to visit her old tavern in Surrattsville, Maryland, on April 11 and April 14, 1865. It cannot be a coincidence, the author reasons, that two hours after the assassination Booth stopped by the tavern to pick up weapons and supplies. Furthermore, Larson states that it cannot be a coincidence that Booth had given Mrs. Surratt ten dollars to rent a coach to make those trips to Maryland. Such inferences enable Larson to portray Mrs. Surratt as a logical and shrewd member of the Lincoln kidnapping plot and the later assassination.

Larson’s conclusion that Surratt was guilty makes the book especially notable, for previous studies of Surratt’s trial by David M. DeWitt, Helen Jones Campbell, Guy W. Moore, and Elizabeth Steger Trindal have either proclaimed her innocence outright or at least leaned in that direction. In arguing for Surratt’s guilt, Larson becomes the first author of a book specifically about Surratt to make so bold a statement.1

Unfortunately, the boldness of that statement is undercut by the sloppiness of Larson’s methodology and argument. One problem is

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1. Recent books by Edward Steers and Michael Kaufman also posit Surratt’s guilt, but in the context of larger works on the assassination.

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that Larson relies primarily on earlier studies of Surratt and the trial rather than on primary sources. Another is that the book is excessively speculative. While it would have been impossible for Larson to write this book without speculation, it is often gratuitous. One example is a long passage near the beginning of the book in which Larson muses about Surratt’s relationship with her family following her marriage to John Surratt Sr. Such digressions, of which there are many, add nothing to Larson’s argument; instead they distract the reader from her objective of proving Surratt’s guilt.

Weakening Larson’s argument is the book’s chronological structure. Before Larson reaches Surratt’s trial, she attempts to set the stage for Lincoln’s assassination by covering Surratt’s antebellum upbringing, the struggles in her marriage, and her role as a Confederate supporter during the first years of the Civil War. Larson’s singular focus on the assassination propels her too quickly through those early, but important, years of Surratt’s life.\textsuperscript{2}

Clearly, the opening chapters were intended to supply the motives (her entrenchment in the slave system, love of the South, history as a Confederate sympathizer) for Surratt’s participation in Lincoln’s assassination. Covering those years in brief at the beginning of the book makes them seem insubstantial. The oversimplification is unfortunate, because those opening chapters contain everything Larson needed to craft a convincing argument. Had she opened the book with the assassination trial and introduced the details of Surratt’s early life while developing the book’s thesis, she would have created a solid and compelling discourse on Surratt’s involvement in the assassination plot. As it stands, her argument is believable but its execution disappointing.

\textsuperscript{2} The early years of Surratt’s life are covered in more detail in Elizabeth Steger Trindal, \textit{Mary Surratt: An American Tragedy} (Gretna, La.: Pelican, 1996).