Review

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The recent memorials and media attention surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination in November 2013 may be the bellwether to what we can expect with the upcoming 150th anniversary of President Abraham Lincoln’s assassination in April 2015. While some very good new books about Kennedy’s assassination were published during 2013—from Secret Service and other eyewitness accounts to newly released photographs and the reissuing of some older but excellent historical treatments—there were countervailing narratives from some of the persistent, discredited, and fictitious tales of Kennedy’s death, too. Some of these conspiracy theories and their bogeymen are familiar and well trodden—the second shooter at the grassy knoll, the Cubans and the Russians, the mafia, or members of Kennedy’s own administration—but the stories made for good entertainment on endless rounds of cable networks. While some of these conspiracy theories have long been denounced, some remain tantalizingly persistent even though their veracity remains elusive. The lesson learned, perhaps, is that historians and researchers need to be well prepared for the 150th anniversary of Lincoln’s assassination and the public discussions that will undoubtedly be generated by it.

Over the past few months and into 2015, much has and will be debated, argued, and celebrated about the final phases of America’s Civil War and its wrenching aftermath. Our intense attachment to ancestral heroes, heroines, villains, and enemies alike has made and will make for interesting and compelling dialogue. As historians, we have a duty to bring this history alive, to help inform and frame the discussions. In spite of the twenty-first-century cynicism that Americans harbor toward politicians and the vagueness with which we remember many of our historical figures, Lincoln’s memory and reputation have stood
remarkably tall and strong, generating evermore appeal and allure. This endless fascination with Lincoln has spawned hundreds of full-length biographies covering every aspect of Lincoln’s boyhood, young adulthood, and maturation into a national leader and, finally, godlike martyr. His legacy has been examined and reexamined time and time again from a variety of broad and narrow perspectives, inspiring Americans for generations.

A smaller but still substantial subset of historical examinations of Lincoln’s life includes scores of works on his assassination at the hands of actor John Wilkes Booth and his unlikely band of coconspirators. Since the 1970s, a great deal of research has been conducted in this specific field, mostly by an avid group of intrepid researchers who successfully uncovered remarkable new information about Booth’s conspiracy to kidnap, then kill, the president. This new work reveals a fascinating web of relationships and events that set the stage for an implausibly successful assassination. Edward Steers Jr., Michael Kauffman, Harold Holzer, Frank Williams, Richard Sloan, Betty Ownsbe, Thomas Reed Turner, William Hanchett, Roy Z. Chamlee Jr., Elizabeth Leonard, Laurie Verge, James Swanson, and many more (too numerous to mention here) have vastly reshaped our knowledge and interpretation of the assassination.

It was with some surprise, then, that Bill O'Reilly, a conservative political commentator and host of the top-rated Fox News show The O'Reilly Factor, added his own nonfiction version with Killing Lincoln: The Shocking Assassination That Changed America Forever. Why would a busy media personality take on such a project? A columnist and an author of numerous books, O'Reilly is known for his controversial and aggressive interviewing style. An Emmy Award–winning journalist with a degree from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, O'Reilly has solid investigative and writing credentials. His interest in this topic is also somewhat personal; a former history teacher, he has a well-known passion for American history. He did not, as some have argued, publish this book to make money (the profits being directed to charitable causes). Given the excitement over the sesquicentennial of the Civil War and the preponderance of new Civil War titles coming on the market, it should not be a surprise after all that O'Reilly would want to enter the fray. The success of any book penned by or attributed to O'Reilly would naturally experience great attention: his millions of followers can be counted as dependable consumers of his work. So Killing Lincoln deserves close attention and scrutiny.

Well-read students of the Lincoln assassination will be disappointed. In spite of decades of new and exceptional research, O'Reilly claims
that much “has been speculated about the events leading up to the murder and immediately afterward, but few people know what really happened” (2). Sadly, readers will not learn much of the truth or anything new here either.

How much of this book was actually written by O’Reilly is anyone’s guess, though I suspect very little. Coauthor Martin Dugard has written a dozen nonfiction books over the past decade and a half, writing popular histories with other high-profile writers and personalities on characters as varied as King Tut, Stanley and Livingstone, Columbus, and Lance Armstrong. He earned best-selling-author status with *Killing Lincoln* in 2011. Dugard and O’Reilly expanded their joint success with *Killing Kennedy* in 2012 and, most recently, *Killing Jesus* in the fall of 2013. The three books have sold millions of copies.

Dugard is an accomplished and avid endurance runner, but his credentials as a historian are less clear. It does not appear that he or O’Reilly used any primary sources but rather relied on secondary sources to re-create the dramatic days leading up to, during, and after Lincoln’s murder. Much of *Killing Lincoln* is a regurgitation of well-worn myths and misinterpretations of the assassination story. This would be inconsequential if the book had not achieved such wide readership but, instead, it complicates decades of effort by noted historians and researchers who have painstakingly documented the plot to kill Lincoln. In his note to readers, O’Reilly writes that this book is “a no spin American Story” (2). It is, however, a well-spun yarn. Unfortunately, myths tend to stick better, and longer, than the truth.

In spite of this, *Killing Lincoln* is a nicely paced, well-written narrative offering a quick read for a general audience. This is commendable—too much of our history is written for the academy or for small groups of like-minded specialists. Writing for a general audience requires skills that are not taught or encouraged in graduate history programs across the country, which is unfortunate.

Dugard’s engaging and swift-moving narrative carries the reader through the first few days of April 1865; from the final battle at Petersburg and the taking of Richmond, to the surrender at Appomattox Court House, Virginia. The last two-thirds of the book cover the days leading up to April 14, Lincoln’s assassination, and a hurried and superficial run through the twelve-day search for Booth and the other conspirators. A mere five pages are dedicated to the trial of the eight accused coconspirators and the hanging of four of them. It is imaginatively written, especially in Dugard and O’Reilly’s vignettes about events, like the siege of Petersburg that provides good context for and satisfying intimacy with figures like Generals Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant.
The authors’ descriptions of the last-gasp effort by General Lee’s men at Petersburg and subsequent surrender at Appomattox Court House set the tone for the last days of Lincoln’s presidency—exhaustion, disappointment, humiliation, jubilation, and relief.

A third of the way into the book, the authors pick up John Wilkes Booth in the midst of transforming from a potential kidnapper to a future assassin. It is April 10 and Booth’s uncontrollable anger over the Confederacy’s defeat is fostering desperation that will drive him to commit murder. Skillfully juxtaposed with this fury is the great weariness and trepidation Lincoln bears now that the war is over. The authors effectively depict these two men in parallel worlds—their fates intertwined in a steady march to the death. Unfortunately, this is also where the book begins to fall apart. Rather than put this engaging and compelling writing in service of solid historical interpretation of the assassination plot itself, the authors chase discredited myths, conspiracy theories, and unsubstantiated claims. A few misstatements of fact might be forgiven, but the mistakes here quickly pile up, becoming uncomfortably common and throwing serious doubt on the book’s reliability. Poor editing and fact checking can account for some of the errors, but the sheer volume of them becomes inexcusable. This is particularly appalling since we have excellent books on the subject and thousands of pages of primary research materials, including period newspapers and the official government records related to the assassination and trial, readily available in digitized format online or in published volumes.

There are no footnotes or chapter notes, making it impossible to discern where the authors derived their information. A brief bibliographic essay sheds little light on their sources. The small selection includes some of the best histories on the subject, but the authors seem to have drawn on them only sparingly. The most disreputable secondary sources, also listed, appear to have influenced the writing of this book more directly. In fact, despite O’Reilly’s “no spin” pledge, he and Dugard promote the long-discredited claim that Edwin Stanton, Lincoln’s secretary of war, was the mastermind behind a corporate and political plot to kill Lincoln. Basing too much of their interpretation on the weird and roundly denounced conspiracy theories promoted by Ray Neff and Leonard Guttridge in *Dark Union*, the authors seem to favor innuendo and insinuation over well-researched and highly acclaimed interpretations of the assassination.1 There are also alarming traces of the work of Otto Eisenschiml, whose 1937 book Why

Was Lincoln Murdered? singlehandedly and shamelessly destroyed Stanton’s reputation for generations. Eisenschiml’s work is not among the authors’ list of recommended books, but its shadow falls broadly across Killing Lincoln. Stanton was a dedicated public servant and an effective leader during the war. To continue slandering him 150 years later is as confounding as it is confusing.

The authors carelessly mix up timelines, conflate events, and incorrectly identify characters and places connected to the conspiracy. They describe one of Booth’s coconspirators, George Atzerodt, as a “drifter,” even though he had already been correctly identified as a carriage maker (207, 261). Lewis Powell was “mentally impaired,” they claim, from a head injury courtesy of a mule kick, making him insensitive to “mass murder” (168). Where these references come from is unknown, since the authors do not provide endnotes. Louis Weichmann, a friend of coconspirator John Surratt and a boarder in Mary Surratt’s house, is mischaracterized as a soldier, which he most definitely was not (168).

Everyone, it seems to the authors, was “terrified of attending the theater with the Lincolns” on the evening of the assassination, when General Ulysses S. Grant and his wife Julia declined their invitation and Mary Lincoln was searching for replacements (178). Why, exactly, would everyone be “terrified” to go to the theater with the Lincolns? Do the authors mean to imply that everyone knew that Lincoln was going to be assassinated? How peculiar that this foreknowledge was never reported or that no one was able to prevent the assassination because of it. The authors provide no evidence that anyone in the president’s circle knew what was about to happen.

Lincoln’s deathbed scene is captivating; the authors’ description of the efforts to comfort and save the dying president at the Petersen House during his last hours is haunting and well-written. But this scene, too, is peppered with mistakes. There were fifty-five people, not “more than sixty-five” who visited the president in the modest nine-and-a-half- by seventeen-foot room over the eight hours he lay dying on the small bed (230). No more than half a dozen people could stand in the room (which also contained the bed, a dresser, a table, and several chairs) at one time, so it is impossible that “twenty men packed” the room when Lincoln took his last breath (231).

Dugard and O’Reilly save their biggest mistakes for Mary Surratt. One of Booth’s intimate coconspirators, Mary was significant enough to warrant a death sentence. Yet she receives scant attention throughout the book, and only at the very end is she hastily connected to Booth. In fact, for months Booth and his team met and plotted in her boardinghouse on H Street in Washington, DC. Her son John, an active coconspirator, provided crucial rebel introductions and connections that Booth required to execute his bold plan. Two more of the coconspirators, as well as other rebel spies, roomed in her boardinghouse, though Booth did not. A Confederate sympathizer, Mary provided a safe and secret lair for the assassins, delivering messages and supplies at crucial moments in support of Booth’s final plan. She did not provide weapons, however. It was her son, John, who hid Booth’s shotguns behind the walls of his mother’s leased tavern in southern Maryland. John “becomes a suspect,” the authors write, “because police are watching his mother,” but it was Mary who became a suspect because the police were looking for her son (237). During the trial, most journalists never saw her face because she wore a thick black veil. She was never held captive on the ironclad monitor Montauk but was imprisoned in the Annex of the Old Capitol Prison, then transferred to the Washington Arsenal where she joined the other seven conspirators awaiting their trial. “She was barely tended to by her captors or given freedom to properly care for herself,” the authors argue (278). This could not be farther from the truth. She suffered from a host of ailments (possibly colitis, ulcers, or any number of intestinal infections), but her “haunted, bloated appearance” was not due to a “barely habitable” cell (278). She was never shackled nor forced to wear the suffocating canvas hoods required of the men, which the authors claim disfigured her face. In fact, because of her sex and age, she was accorded better treatment and privileges. Her daughter Anna was allowed stay with her in her cell during the trial. Her health was of great concern to the prison warden, who made extra efforts to help her eat and a doctor visited her frequently. The authors claim, however, that it was Stanton (of course!) who was responsible for her “disfiguring transformation” (278).

The authors never reveal Mary’s true role in the assassination plot, preferring to perpetuate the myth of her innocence. To that end, they wholly manufacture a gallows scene when, in the moments before the hangman gave his signal, they report that coconspirator Lewis Powell shouted, “Mrs. Surratt is innocent!” (280). That never happened. The authors also claim that when the gallows floor was released and the four conspirators dropped to their deaths, Mary “swings for five long
minutes before her larynx is crushed and her body stops fighting for life” (282). The truth is Mary died instantly.

These might be considered small quibbles (among many more) with a well-written book, but, after adding up all the mistakes, one wonders how two authors could overlook so many errors and confer authority to such old discarded theories. Given O’Reilly’s credentials and high-profile stature, it is disappointing that he wasted an opportunity to honor Lincoln and tell an accurate history of the assassination. O’Reilly and Dugard’s claim that the sequences of events leading up to Lincoln’s assassination “have been tied to a murky conspiracy that most likely will never be uncovered” is historical fiction (166). We have over forty years of excellent, expository research and writing revealing much about the conspiracy to kidnap, and then kill, President Lincoln. There is no excuse, then, for us not to be prepared with the truth about the real conspiracy behind President Lincoln’s assassination during the sesquicentennial in 2015.