Review Essay

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In a story about Thomas J. Craughwell’s *Stealing Lincoln’s Body* on the CNN.com Web site, Bob Bender, senior editor of Simon and Schuster, notes that Abraham Lincoln has been a best-selling subject, probably since the month after he died. While Lincoln scholars have occasionally agonized that there is nothing new to be said about Lincoln—witness James G. Randall’s 1936 *American Historical Review* article, “Has the Lincoln Theme Been Exhausted?”—books about the sixteenth president continue to pour forth unabated. (This soul searching seems unique to the Lincoln field; one is hard put to think of another research field where scholars raise similar concerns.) If anything, the pace may be accelerating, with the approaching bicentennial of Lincoln’s birth in 2009 calling renewed attention to all facets of his life and career.

Bender also cites the old adage that, in the publishing world, books on animals, medicine, and Lincoln are always guaranteed best-sellers. George Stevens in 1939 published a book titled *Lincoln’s Doctor’s Dog & Other Famous Best Sellers*, and in 2001 Richard Grayson produced a work with a similar title. Neither book sold many copies; Grayson’s sold fewer than two hundred, causing him to write “The only thing I can come up with is that Lincoln isn’t as popular as he used to be.”

Given the limitations on press budgets, the number of copies of a book that must be sold to make a profit, a decline in the number of Lincoln collectors, and severe restrictions on library budgets, Grayson may be correct: merely publishing a Lincoln book is no longer a guarantee of financial success. Thus, it is a bit surprising that two books on the 1876 attempt to steal Lincoln’s body and hold it for ransom have appeared in the last ten years. The first modern account is not Craughwell’s volume but Bonnie Stahlman Speer’s *The Great Abraham Lincoln Hijack*, published in 1997.

As Speer notes in her work, while we are much more familiar with kidnappings and ransom demands of all sorts in the twenty-first century, such events were shocking one hundred and fifty years ago,
although not unknown. John Carroll Power, the custodian of the Lincoln tomb, in his 1890 account of the attempt to steal Lincoln’s body, wrote of an 1830 effort to steal George Washington’s remains. Power attributed the theft to a physician who wanted a relic. Craughwell deals with the same event, crediting the theft to an unnamed gardener, angry at being dismissed by John Augustine Washington II, one of Washington’s heirs and nephews. The tomb was in such deplorable condition that many of the coffins (which were stored above ground) had rotted away, spilling the bones on the ground. The thief, who was rather quickly apprehended, had taken the wrong skull, which was returned to its resting place. The theft prompted the Washington heirs to build a new and more secure tomb. In similar fashion, the guardians of the Lincoln tomb also devoted much more attention to security after the 1876 attempt to steal Lincoln’s remains.

One might assume that the attempt to desecrate the tomb of the father of his country would be a well-known event but, in fact, it is obscure and forgotten. That two modern authors have investigated the attempt to hold and ransom Lincoln’s remains demonstrates that, while Lincoln books may no longer be automatic money-makers, the American public still thirsts for details about the sixteenth president in a way that even Washington cannot match. Questions abound: Was he straight or gay? How did his melancholy influence his career? Did he suffer from Marfan syndrome? And, with Craughwell’s book, What might we learn about Lincoln’s legacy given the attempt to steal his body?

Craughwell admits that the attempt to steal Washington’s skull, an event so obscure that it was probably unknown to the Lincoln grave robbers, was probably not the catalyst for the 1876 attempt. Custodian Power also discussed an 1867 plot by a Springfield attorney to steal Lincoln’s body and hold it for ransom. Nothing came of that attempt, and the circumspect Power did not provide any names of those involved. Nonetheless, the plotters, including counterfeiter Jim Kennally, who often visited Springfield, could easily have heard rumors about this much more recent scheme.

While Bonnie Speer concentrates more on the details of the grave robbing and the trial, Craughwell places the events in a broader context. One of the issues that Craughwell deals with is the art of embalming. As he notes, modern embalming techniques began in France in the 1830s with Jean Nicolas Gannal and J. P. Sucquet. Previously, funeral customs had been to bury the body as quickly as possible, except for kings and important clergy who lay in state. Eventually many families wanted to display the remains of the deceased for a few days, and a
method was needed that would keep the corpse looking fresh and natural.

The Civil War with its hundreds of thousands of casualties had quickened the interest in the embalmer’s profession. Families of fallen soldiers recoiled at the thought of dead relatives lying far from home or in a mass grave, but the new embalming methods allowed soldiers’ remains to be shipped home over long distances.

Given that the Lincoln funeral train would wind its way over many hundreds of miles to Springfield in a journey that would take many days, funeral director Charles Brown accompanied the president’s body all the way from Washington. In Springfield, Brown and local undertaker Thomas Lynch had to purchase rouge chalk, ash, and some brushes to freshen Lincoln’s face, which had blackened due to the effects of the head wound. Ironically, undertakers infused so much embalming fluid that the body had become virtually mumified, making the features quite recognizable when the coffin was opened before final burial in 1901.

The site of Lincoln’s burial also mirrored a trend in the nineteenth century, the rural cemetery movement. One of the first such cemeteries, Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts, had rapidly become as popular a tourist attraction as Paul Revere’s house or the Bunker Hill Monument. Mary Lincoln wanted her husband buried at rural Oak Ridge on the outskirts of Springfield, while the town fathers wished to inter the president downtown on the Mather site, which was next to the railroad and presumably might generate more tourist business. The ensuing dispute was settled only when Mrs. Lincoln vehemently asserted her rights as the president’s widow and threatened to have her husband buried elsewhere if her instructions were not carried out. Springfield leaders did not have to be worried: Although the tomb is not in the downtown area with the other Lincoln sites, the grave is still one of the most visited places in the city.

Craughwell provides interesting material about the world of the counterfeiters. Counterfeiting existed even in colonial times with the manufacturing of bogus wampum, although initially the crime was considered a misdemeanor. By the 1700s, however, it was considered a more serious offense, with a Philadelphia counterfeiter being hanged and a Newport offender having his ears cut off as a prelude to being sold into involuntary servitude. Numbers of women were also involved in the trade.

In the late 1850s, given the number of different currencies issued by state governments and banks, there were, according to Craughwell, more than four thousand types of counterfeit currency in circulation.
When the government issued greenbacks as a means to finance the Civil War, counterfeiting threatened to undermine the war effort. Eventually William Wood, the Superintendent of the Old Capitol Prison, was assigned to track down and apprehend major counterfeiters. Ultimately, he became head of the Secret Service. Not surprisingly Wood employed undercover agents who themselves often had unsavory backgrounds and criminal records.

When Chicago Chief of Police Elmer Washburn assumed the position as Secret Service head, he attempted to make the service more professional. One of his agents was Patrick Tyrrell, who played a leading role in trying to thwart the thieves who were planning to steal Lincoln’s body.

The events themselves remind one of the phrase “The gang who couldn’t shoot straight.” The plan was put into motion in 1876 when, on Washburn’s orders, Tyrrell arrested Ben Boyd and his wife. Boyd was a master engraver, and his sentence of ten years in prison put a crimp in the counterfeiting operations of Jim Kennally. Kennally decided that the way to get Boyd out of prison and back into counterfeiting was to steal Lincoln’s remains and trade them for Boyd.

There were actually two plots. The first involved newspaper editor and counterfeiter Thomas Sharp and his gang, who resided in Lincoln, Illinois. Sharp and his confederates moved to Springfield where they opened a dance hall and saloon. Unfortunately, Sharp bragged about their plans to a prostitute, Belle Bruce, who in turn informed the chief of police. With the scheme compromised, Sharp and his men returned home.

Kennally then enlisted some Chicago associates—Terrence Mullen, with whom he was a silent partner in the Hub saloon, and John Hughes. The plan now called for stealing Lincoln’s body and hiding it in the Indiana dunes. Not only would Boyd’s release be demanded but also $200,000. The plan went awry from the beginning. Hughes and Mullen enlisted Lewis Swegles, who claimed to be an experienced grave robber, and William Nealy, whom Swegles said could drive the wagon and team of horses. Unknown to the robbers, both men were Secret Service informants, which meant that Tyrrell was fully apprised of their every move and could also brief Lincoln friend Leonard Swett and Lincoln’s surviving son, Robert Todd Lincoln, on the plot.

Hughes and Mullen decided to carry out the plan on November 7, 1876, the date of the presidential election. Liquor would be flowing freely, there would be crowds of farmers with wagons, and one more wagon with a package on the back would not attract undue attention.
Tyrrell and his men were in place around the tomb when the grave robbers broke in and partially removed the coffin from its sarcophagus, as agents determined that it would be better to catch the thieves in the act. As the agents moved to arrest the conspirators, George Hay, one of Tyrell’s men, accidentally discharged his pistol. At that moment Tyrrell noticed on the tomb’s parapet a shadowy figure with whom he began to exchange gunfire. After a number of shots were fired, it became apparent that the man on the parapet was a Pinkerton detective whom Tyrrell had enlisted; the two were lucky that neither had been wounded or killed. Of course at the sound of the shooting, Mullen and Hughes had fled, eventually making their way back to Chicago, where they were easily arrested.

Strangely, Hughes who was in custody, managed to give an interview to a reporter in which he blamed the entire affair on Swegles, and portrayed himself and Mullen as innocent victims. He also claimed that Washburn and Tyrrell were out to get him, a claim that was apparently believed by some observers.

Parenthetically, Craughwell interjects an interesting note about the social and cultural history of the Irish in Illinois, since Tyrrell, Hughes, and Mullen were all of Irish ancestry. Hughes and Mullen were representatives of the Irish criminal class, who were overrepresented in the prisons and reform schools of the state. Patrick Tyrrell, however, represented a rising middle class. Craughwell argues that through becoming a professional law enforcer, he hoped to eliminate this criminal class and bring respectability to his fellow Irishmen.

Perhaps even more surprising, these sensational events did not gain immediate national attention as they would today. This was partially because no winner had been decided in the presidential contest between Rutherford Hayes and Samuel Tilden, and that story eclipsed all others. Some accounts accused Washburn of looking for a more important job for himself; others that the Democrats or Republicans had concocted the tale to help their candidate achieve victory. Still others said they did not believe the story. There was also some criticism of the Secret Service for knowing about the plot and allowing Hughes and Mullen to escape the cemetery.

Craughwell does provide one fairly significant corrective about the trial. Most accounts state that authorities discovered to their surprise that there was no law against grave robbing in Illinois. Therefore, they had to rely on conspiracy and theft charges. This was not true, and the author quotes from the Illinois law against grave robbing. The real issue was that grave robbery only carried a maximum one-year sentence, and the conspiracy charges provided for a longer prison sentence.
term. The sentence would also be served at the state penitentiary at Joliet where the prisoners could be put to hard labor.

Hughes and Mullen continued their bumbling ways during the trial. Several individuals including Hughes’s sister, Bridget, came forward to put up “straw bail” for their release, the practice of pledging property they did not own to make good on bail default. The sister and a number of these “straw bailers” were arrested. The duo also wrote letters to a friend requesting that he provide a false alibi. The letters were intercepted and read into the court record, creating a very negative impression with the jury. There is little wonder that the two men were convicted, although after the trial the jury wrote a letter demanding the indictment of Swegles, suggesting that he should be sentenced to three years in prison, as they believed that he was the gang’s ringleader.

Of course the saga did not end with the trial. Lincoln’s family and friends wished to guard against future threats to Lincoln’s coffin. A “Lincoln Guard of Honor” was formed in 1880, and Lincoln was secretly reburied in the tomb’s interior, eventually being moved several times due to the tomb’s deterioration and a high water table. When Mary Todd Lincoln died in 1882 she was also secretly buried beside her husband. In the nineteenth century, such treatment of the deceased was considered almost as bad as the attempt to steal the body—which was another reason to keep the reburials a secret.

Nonetheless, rumors of this secret burial occasionally leaked to the public. Visitors asked if the grave was empty, and Power had to come up with some creative responses, not wishing to lie, but also not wanting to give any hint that Lincoln had been moved. This fits with an ancient folk-myth tradition. Lloyd Lewis, in his classic Myths After Lincoln (1929), noted the pattern in antiquity where the slayer of the folk-god also made himself immortal. The murderer could not die an easy death but must wander the world alone and friendless with every man’s hand turned against him, always looking over his shoulder for some friend of the victim to take revenge.

In Lewis’s view, Booth and Lincoln had become linked in this manner, which accounted for the many alleged sightings of Booth after he had supposedly perished in Garrett’s Barn. One of the most notable proponents of this myth was Finis L. Bates, author of The Escape and Suicide of John Wilkes Booth (1907). Bates claimed that a John St. Helen whom he met in the 1870s in Granbury, Texas, and who died as David George in 1903 in Enid, Oklahoma, was actually John Wilkes Booth. An undertaker had been charging the curious a fee to view the remains, which Bates acquired, exhibiting the “Booth mummy” in carnival shows.
C. Wyatt Evans in *The Legend of John Wilkes Booth, Myth, Memory & a Mummy* (2004) places the mummy in the context of borderlands history. Enid was in frontier Oklahoma, but the town itself was rather well populated and a place of modernity and commercialism. In such a borderlands area many people made up or exaggerated their backgrounds. Local officials also welcomed the tale as a means of drawing people to Enid, although the legend soon took on a life of its own.

Ultimately, former Confederates saw the “mummy” as a validation of the “Lost Cause.” The South’s white vindicator had not died after all but became a symbol for those attempting to rewrite the history of race relations and the Civil War.

The idea that the folk-god was not dead and buried where he was supposed to be was also part of this mythology. When the Huns dammed a river to bury Atilla and then let the waters flow to obliterate his grave, it was easy for rumors to arise that the great leader was still alive. In a similar vein, German peasants believed that Frederick I (Barbarossa), who died on a crusade, was not really dead but resting in a sacred place with his great red beard growing around a table where he slept. When the circle was completed, Frederick would return to save Germany. Of course Americans in the 1870s and 1880s did not believe that Lincoln had survived Booth’s bullet, but questions about an empty grave suggest a modern version of this mythology.

Curiosity about Lincoln’s remains manifested on several occasions. In 1887, after some repairs to the tomb, both Lincoln caskets were reburied. Plumber Leon Hopkins was summoned, since according to Power, it was absolutely necessary to identify the remains given the number of times they had been moved. Hopkins cut a hole in the casket, and witnesses agreed that the body was Lincoln. No doubt part of this was simply morbid curiosity, since it seems strange that anyone would really believe that Lincoln’s body had somehow disappeared.

In 1901 Robert Todd Lincoln finally settled on a plan for the permanent reburial of his father. Robert, who had worked for the Pullman Company and ultimately became its president, was well aware of the extraordinary measures that had been taken by the Pullman family to secure the remains of George Pullman against desecration by disgruntled employees. Copying the Pullman burial, a deep grave was dug, a steel protector was set in place, and tons of concrete were poured. While some might believe that Booth was still wandering the earth in Oklahoma, Lincoln’s resting place was secured forever.

In the end, a reader does wonder about the need for two full-length books appearing within a decade of each other about the attempt to
steal Lincoln’s body. Historians will produce new interpretations on such topics as Lincoln’s religion, his views on race and slavery, and his executive abilities, but there are unlikely to be new revelations about the 1876 event. Taken together, Speers and Craughwell probably provide all that we need to know about the grave robbing; while Craughwell does go a bit beyond what Speers did in 1997, his book does not totally supersede her work. In the end, though, the reason for two such studies rests with the continued fascination with anything Lincoln. And, of course, stories of counterfeiting, grave robbing, and moved coffins are intrinsically interesting.

Lincoln’s final reburial in 1901 provides one final lesson about how close the past really can be. Thirteen-year-old Fleetwood Lindley, whose father was a member of the Lincoln Guard of Honor, was dismissed early from school and raced to Oak Ridge Cemetery. Leon Hopkins opened the coffin for one last viewing, and Lindley not only saw the remains but was allowed to hold one of the straps while the casket was lowered into the grave. While excited at his role in this historic event, Lindley noted later that he slept with Lincoln’s image for the next six months.

A colleague of mine, the late Dr. Jordan D. Fiore, in an effort to demonstrate historical connections, used to say to his students, “I shook the hand of a man who shook the hand of Abraham Lincoln.” The immediate reaction was “What’s the joke?” since students couldn’t conceive how this could be possible. But as Professor Fiore would point out, if a five year old shook Lincoln’s hand in 1865, then Fiore himself could have easily shaken that man’s hand in the 1930s or 1940s.

Hughes and Mullen never came close to stealing Lincoln’s coffin, much less to opening it to gaze on his remains. Had they not made their bungled attempt, however, the casket would undoubtedly have remained where it was and there would not have been a man (Lindley died in 1963) who, while not alive in 1865, could honestly say to his astonished listeners, “I saw the face of Abraham Lincoln.”