

The Man(ia) behind the Murder

By Kelsey

Every night, President Abraham Lincoln always had one last parting word with William H. Crook, who was his bodyguard. However, this night, April 14, 1865, the saying was different. Instead of the usual cheerful “Good night, Crook,” this evening Lincoln declared “*Good bye, Crook*” (Norton). Although Crook might have thought it slightly strange at the time, he could not have known the relevancy that this little slip of a tongue held on that doomful day.

As the first assassination of a President ever committed in the United States, the murder of Abraham Lincoln shocked the nation. Turning from rejoicing over the Union army’s victory of winning the war, the nation immediately mourned the death of “Father Abraham”, as many called him (Encyclopaedia “Booth”). The events leading up to the murder, the actual terrible act, and the stories of the aftermath reveal what lead John Wilkes Booth, who was the assassin, to murder President Lincoln.

John Wilkes Booth was born into a wealthy family of actors on May 10, 1838. Although he started acting at a young age, John constantly forgot his lines and thus was never as successful as was his brother, Edwin. (Encyclopaedia “Booth”) Writing to his sister, John stated in his anger, “I must have fame!” However, relocated to Richmond, his good looks charmed the Southern people. While in Virginia, John, dressed in Confederate army attire, witnessed the execution of John Brown, an abolitionist who had led an uprising in Virginia. (Norton “Life and Plot”) Although he became popular, he still “exhibited an emotional instability and a driving egocentricity” (Encyclopaedia “Booth”).

John Wilkes Booth joined the “Know-Nothing” party, which wanted to preserve the country for whites (Norton “Life and Plot”). Everything that Booth hated was embodied in President Lincoln, who fought to free slaves. Blaming Lincoln for the troubles of the South, Booth yearned for harsh revenge. (Norton “Assassination”) Although Booth loved the South dearly, he promised his mother that he would not fight in the Civil War and he moved to the North, where he became even more passionately embittered against abolitionists (Encyclopaedia “Assassination”). In 1862, Booth was arrested for several “anti-government” comments. Defending his motives, in a letter to his sister he wrote, “So help me holy God! My soul, life, and possessions are for the South.” (Norton “Life and Plot”)

On November 9 of 1863, Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln attended a play at Ford’s theater, in which John Wilkes Booth portrayed villainous character. Oddly enough, whenever Booth uttered threats as the villain, he would look directly at Lincoln, and one time went so far as to point directly at Lincoln’s face. Although both the Lincolns noticed this strange behavior, neither one thought very much of it. (Norton “Life and Plot”) Early in 1864, Booth, along with fellow conspirators including Samuel Arnold, Michael O’Laughlen, John Surratt, Lewis Powell, George Atzerodt, and David Herold, plotted to kidnap Lincoln. According to their plan, they would take him to the Confederate capital, Richmond, where they would demand ransom in the form of all the Confederate prisoners of war. It was during this planning time that Booth began to talk with Dr. Samuel Mudd and to use a house owned by Mary Surratt for gatherings. Booth heard that Lincoln would be attending a play on March 17, 1865, and planned to kidnap the President at this time. (Norton “Assassination”) However, when Lincoln changed his plans and the plot failed, several of the conspirators began to “melt away.” At some point after this attempt, these words were found etched on a window in the McHenry House, a boardinghouse which Booth

frequented: “Abe Lincoln departed this life August 13th, 1864 by the effects of poison.”

Although the window was not in Booth’s room, it is known that he was good friends with a druggist’s clerk who would have had easy access to poison. (Norton “Life and Plot”)

Booth was presented with another easy chance to kill Lincoln. Engaged to Lucy Hale, who was the daughter of the minister to Spain at the time, Booth was able to attend Lincoln’s second inauguration. In words to a friend, Booth stated “What an excellent chance I had to kill the President, if I had wished, on inauguration day!” On April 9, 1865, General Lee of the Confederates surrendered to General Grant of the Union army. Two days later, Lincoln gave a speech from the White House in which he expressed how he wanted to extend rights to blacks. Thoroughly angered by this statement, revengeful Booth went so far as to say, “That is the last speech he will ever make. (Norton “Life and Plot”).

Friday April 14, 1865, dawned just like any other day at the White House. After attending several meetings, Lincoln spoke with different people and eagerly anticipated the evening’s entertainment (Norton “Last Day”). However, this day could not have been any more different from every other day in his life. At the same time that Lincoln was holding a meeting with his Cabinet concerning reconstruction (Norton “Last Day”), Booth stopped by Ford’s theater to pick up his mail (Norton “Booth on Assassination Day”). While there, he discovered that President Lincoln, along with his wife and several other attendees, would be attending *Our American Cousin*. Booth held a meeting with his co-conspirators in which it was determined that he would kill Lincoln, Atzerodt would kill Vice President Andrew Johnson, and Powell would kill Secretary of State William Seward, all around 10:00 PM. Convinced that his plan would work, Booth believed that the chaotic mayhem which resulted would allow the South to take over. (Norton “Assassination”)

Around 6:00 PM, Booth entered the Ford's Theater, where he tampered with the door so that he would be able to jam it from the inside later that evening (Encyclopaedia "Booth"). Meanwhile, concerned for Lincoln, the President's body guard Crook was begging Lincoln to not attend the play. When Lincoln refused to change his plans, Crook asked to be allowed to go with them. (EyeWitness "Death") Despite many warnings by his staff of assassination attempts, President Lincoln gently brushed off Crook's concern and told him to go home ("Lincoln, Abraham"). However, assigned as bodyguard for the evening was John F. Parker. Along with Henry Rathbone and fiancée Clara Harris, Lincoln and his wife arrived late to Ford's theater at 8:30. Arriving just an hour afterward, Booth left his horse with Joseph Burroughs, who was a theater worker. He headed over to a nearby saloon and returned at 10:07 to find the box unguarded. (Norton "Assassination") During intermission, a man named Charles Forbes had invited Parker to head to the saloon with him. When Booth reached the box, Parker was either still at the saloon or had relocated himself to a better seat, since from his previous seat he could only hear the play. (Norton "Parker") Unfortunately, now all that stood between Booth and Lincoln was an unlocked door.

Entering the room at about 10:15 (Norton "Last Day"), Booth barred the door from the inside. At a time when he knew that laughter would fill the theater, Booth shot Lincoln from point-blank range in the back of the head. As Rathbone rushed towards him to defend everyone, Booth slashed him with a dagger and jumped from the railing to the stage. (Encyclopaedia "Assassination") However, Booth's spur caught on a flag that was hanging from the President's box and he broke his fibula landing (EyeWitness "Death"). Painfully limping across the stage, Booth shouted either "Sic Semper Tyrannis!" (Thus to tyrants) or "The South is avenged!" {Expert Michael Kauffman believed that Booth broke his leg when his horse fell in his escape}

(Norton "Last Day"). According to Karen Zeinert, although the audience seemed paralyzed with shock, the cast and crew jumped to action. Harry Hawk, who was the lone actor on the stage at the time,

knew that Booth wasn't part of *Our American Cousin*, nor was his bloody knife a prop. Furthermore, Major Rathbone and Clara Harris were both shouting, begging someone – anyone! – to stop the assailant. But when Hawk started toward Booth, Booth raised his knife in the air, readying himself to attack. This forced Hawk to retreat. William Withers, the orchestra leader, then started toward Booth. When Withers was within striking distance, Booth repeatedly swung the tip of his knife at the musician, shredding his jacket and frightening him way as well. The path to the back door was now clear. (12)

Baffled by what was going on, the audience thought that this dramatic scene was supposed to be a part of the play, until they heard the First Lady scream for help as her husband collapsed in his chair ("Abraham Lincoln's Assassination"). Entering 3 inches behind his left ear, the bullet traveled 7.5 inches into his brain behind his right eye (Norton "Last Day"), leaving him paralyzed and breathing heavily ("Lincoln Papers"). Rushing to the President's box, Twenty-three year old Charles Leale was the first doctor to respond, and he pronounced "His wound is mortal. It is impossible for him to recover." Lincoln was carried to the Petersen House across the street, where every doctor in Washington D.C. was ready to help. Surgeons stated that the average man would live for no more than 2 hours, but Lincoln lasted for 9. (Norton "Last Day") In the presence of the Vice President, his cabinet, friends and family, Lincoln breathed his last at 7:22 AM the next morning ("Abraham Lincoln's Assassination"). At this point, Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, uttered the famous words: "Now he belongs to the ages" (Norton "Last Day"). Word traveled quickly around the country, and flags were lowered to half mast as the nation turned from celebrating the victory of the Union to mourning the death of its leader ("Abraham Lincoln's Assassination").

In the mean time, Booth, along with David Herold, had quickly escaped Washington D.C. and traveled to Mary Surratt's tavern to pick up supplies (Norton "Assassination"). They then journeyed to southern Maryland, where Dr. Samuel Mudd set Booth's leg. Afterwards, Booth and Herold received help from Thomas A. Jones, who helped them cross the Potomac River onto Virginia. ("Abraham Lincoln's Assassination")

With a \$100,000 reward over Booth's head, the hunt was on (Norton "Last Day"). On April 26, the Union army found Booth and Herold hiding in a barn. Herold surrendered himself to the army, but Booth unabashedly refused to do so. Hoping to draw him out, soldiers lit the building on fire. Eventually, Sergeant Boston Corbett, who had no order to do so, shot Booth out of fear for the lives of his fellow soldiers. (Norton "Assassination") As Booth was dragged out of the burning barn, he looked at his hands and muttered "Useless. Useless."

After the death of Lincoln, justice had to be carried out. Although it had been the plan for Lewis Powell (Paine) to kill the Secretary of State William Henry Seward and for George Atzerodt to kill Vice President Andrew Johnson, neither plan was carried out correctly. Apparently, Atzerodt shied away from the evil deed. In Seward's case, a recent carriage accident kept him confined to bed. Fooling guards with the pretense that he had a medicine delivery to make to the room, Paine was able to enter the house unescorted. Seward's son, who was standing guard outside his father's door, was attacked by Paine. "Beating the son with a pistol until the gun broke", the evil man stormed in the room to kill Seward himself. Valiantly defending the Secretary of State, family members and hospital staff were able to fight off Booth, and he left after only slashing the man in the throat a few times, an act which he assumed killed

Seward. (Zeinert 13-14) However, a metal surgical collar that had been recently placed due to the carriage accident saved Seward's life, and he lived for 7 more years ("Lincoln Papers").

Just a few days after the evil deeds were committed, Booth's conspirators were immediately arrested. Tried by a military tribunal, Mrs. Surratt, Powel, Atzerodt, and Herold were hanged for direct involvement in the murder (Mrs. Surratt was "the first woman put to death by the federal government") ("Abraham Lincoln's Assassination). Dr. Mudd, O'Laughlen, and Arnold were all given a life sentence for helping the conspirators, and Edman Spangler, who had helped Booth escape from the theater, spent six years in prison. After fleeing to Canada, John Surratt then escaped to Europe after the assassination, but when he was captured and tried in 1867, the man was freed. (Norton "Assassination")

One surprising outcome was that of John F. Parker, the bodyguard who had shirked his duty. If a man were to do such a thing today, the punishment would be extremely severe. But in 1856, Parker's case was dismissed and he was never punished for his action. However, ashamed by his actions, Parker still felt the reparations for his wrong deed. As William Crook, a fellow guard the White House stated, "Had he done his duty, I believe President Lincoln would not have been murdered by Booth. Parker knew he had failed in duty. He looked like a convicted criminal the next day. He was never the same man afterward." According to Roger Norton, Lincoln had been unguarded for his last twelve visits to Ford's, and some believe that Parker was meant to be merely an escort for the evening. Perhaps "punishing" him the most was the disregard which Mrs. Lincoln forever held for him after the death of her husband. Assigned the evening at the White House, Parker was yelled at by Mrs. Lincoln, who stated, "So you are on guard tonight – on guard in the White House after helping to murder the President." Although he repented profusely, she dismissed him from her presence. (Norton "Parker") However, her sanity

after Lincoln's death was highly questioned. After the death of her son, Thomas, her eldest son Robert called for a hearing concerning her sanity. The result: she was confined for two or three months in a sanatorium. Although a second hearing repealed the first decision, she was humiliated forever and died soon after in Springfield in 1882 (Encyclopaedia "Lincoln, Mary Todd)

Perhaps the man whose grieving was the hardest was Robert Lincoln, who was the "eldest and only surviving son" of the Lincolns (Encyclopaedia "Lincoln, Mary Todd). Invited to attend *Our American Cousin* with his parents, Robert declined, not knowing that he would never see his father awake again. If Robert had attended the play, he would have sat at the back of the box, as was customary for the youngest person in the party. Abashedly ashamed of his action, Robert firmly believed that, had he been there, he would have been able to fight off Booth and save his father's life. One man in a totally different position than Robert, but with the same sorrow, was John Booth's brother, Edwin. Through the assassination, Edwin lost his brother, the nobility of his family name, and his great president all because of one gunshot. In a letter to a friend he stated, "The news of the morning has made me wretched indeed, not only because I have received the unhappy tidings of the suspicions of a brother's crime, but because a good man and a most justly honored and patriotic ruler has fallen in an hour of national joy by the hand of an assassin." Oddly enough, Edwin found his comfort in the fact that he had saved Robert Lincoln's life. Robert explained the episode "in a 1909 letter to Richard Watson Gilder, editor of *The Century Magazine*."

The incident occurred while a group of passengers were late at night purchasing their sleeping car places from the conductor who stood on the station platform at the entrance of the car. The platform was about the height of the car floor, and there was of course a narrow space between the platform and the car body. There was some crowding, and I happened to be pressed by it against the car body while

waiting my turn. In this situation the train began to move, and by the motion I was twisted off my feet, and had dropped somewhat, with feet downward, into the open space, and was personally helpless, when my coat collar was vigorously seized and I was quickly pulled up and out to a secure footing on the platform. Upon turning to thank my rescuer I saw it was Edwin Booth, whose face was of course well known to me, and I expressed my gratitude to him, and in doing so, called him by name. (Emerson)

Abraham Lincoln's death greatly moved the American people. Although many would never have even thought of assassinating the President, John Wilkes Booth felt no remorse. He felt very strongly for the cause that he held to, stating "This country was formed for the white not for the black man. And looking upon African slavery from the same stand-point, as held by those noble framers of our Constitution, I for one, have ever considered it, one of the greatest blessings (both for themselves and us) that God ever bestowed upon a favored nation." (Norton "Life and Plot") Before Booth committed the terrible act, he wrote in his diary, "For six months we had worked to capture. But our cause being almost lost, something decisive and great must be done." According to Zeinert, Thomas A. Jones, who assisted Booth in escaping, wrote "He frankly admitted that he was the murderer of the president and expressed no regret for the act" (44). Going so far as to expect to be heralded as a hero (Encyclopaedia "Assassination), in his diary a week later, Booth wrote

After being hunted like a dog...with everyman's hand against me, I am here in despair. And why? I, for striking down a...tyrant...am looked upon as a common cut-throat...I hoped for no gain. I knew no private wrong. I struck for my country and that alone. A country that groaned beneath his tyranny, and prayed for this end, and yet now behold the cold hand they extend to me....The little, the very little I left behind to clear my name, the government will not allow to be printed. So ends all. For my country I have given up all that makes life sweet and holy [and] brought misery upon my family....Tonight I will once more try the river with the intent to cross. Though I have a great desire and almost a mind to return to Washington, and in a measure clear my name – which I feel I can do. I do not repent the blow I struck. I may before my God, but not to man. I think I have done well. Who can read his fate? God's will be done. I have too

great a soul to die like a criminal....I do not wish to shed a drop of blood, but "I must fight the course!" 'Tis all that's left me. (Zeinert 51)

In multiple occurrences, Booth stated that he would never repent. He wrote in his diary "For months we had worked to capture. But our cause being almost lost, something decisive and great must be done....I can never repent it though we hated to kill. Our country owed all our troubles to him, and God simply made me the instrument of his punishment." (Zeinert 50) In a letter to a newspaper, Booth stated "Many, I know – the vulgar herd – will blame me for what I am about to do, but posterity, I am sure, will justify me. Right or wrong, God judge me, not man." (Booth 147). Even as he breathed his last, John Wilkes Booth requested that the soldiers "tell his mother that he had died for his country" (Zeinert 53).

Contrary to Booth's exclamation before he pulled the trigger, Abraham Lincoln was far from a tyrant. "Father Abraham" (Encyclopaedia "Booth") deeply loved the American people, including slaves, and most loved him back. However, Booth and his partners-in-crime felt strongly for their cause and despised Lincoln with their whole being. Looking at the events surrounding the assassination, it becomes evident that Booth was the true "tyrant."

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