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Daniel R. Wause

George S. Bryan, *The Great American Myth*. With a new introduction by William Hanchett. New York: Carrick & Evans, 1940; reprint Chicago, 60610: Americana House, Inc., 357-W. Chicago Avenue, 1990, 1994. Pp. xxvi, 436. Illus., maps, index, bibl. \$40 hc, \$20 pb. Ph 312-944-3085; fax 312-944-5549.

In the late afternoon of April 15, 1865, a courier on a mud flecked horse reached the victorious Union armies camped on the field of Appomattox with a two sentence telegram that told them "John Wilkes Booth the assassin" had killed President Abraham Lincoln. That evening generals of three corps of the finest army the United States has perhaps ever fielded met to discuss what to do. As General Joshua Chamberlain records in his memoirs, they assumed the plan behind the murder of Lincoln, whom the soldiers loved "something marvelous", was to destroy the government. They agreed if the government had been seized the army would march on Washington and make General U. S. Grant dictator until constitutional government could be restored. If they did not act the possibility loomed the troops might revolt. In the meantime Secretary of War Edwin Stanton brought order out of chaos and the fear faded.

Almost immediately speculations arose and conspiracy theories soon flourished over who or what forces were behind this extraordinary traumatic incident. From the first days they flooded the national mind and have continued until today, many of them artfully drawn and superbly presented. Conspiracies asserted included international bankers, corrupt federal agencies, Vice President Andrew Johnson, Stanton, Roman Catholics, radical politicians in league with

eastern generals, private parties seeking vengeance, and the dying Confederate States of America. On the basis of several investigations and trials the federal government held the assassin John Wilkes Booth had killed Lincoln for private reasons and had himself been shot during arrest. Three low level assistants aided him, whom they promptly hung (along with the innocent Mrs. Surrat); it jailed others. A sub-controversy continued to spew forth over whether Booth actually died during his arrest or lived on under various aliases.

The theories succumb to elementary logical flaws, commit errors of fundamental fact, demonstrate ignorance of the official investigation, and are marked by superficial research. Hoaxes often have occurred. As a result they cloud the public mind and distort our national history.

In the midst of these wretched books appeared George S. Bryan's *The Great American Myth*. Superbly researched, the product of years of careful study it got scant attention in 1940 and is generally ignored today. It is a well written classic and a good read. Its reprint is a public service.

Bryan demonstrates Booth and his small band acting alone killed Lincoln. Arresting troops shot him. Ultimately buried in Baltimore the eyewitness affirmation of his death and burial is overwhelming both in its large number and in its unimpeachable high quality; it is definitive and irrefutable. Bryan's presentation of the documentary record of the investigation, evaluation of witness testimony, attention to physical details, description of forensic medical findings, and presentation of Booth's flawed character leave little doubt the conspiracy did not go beyond that small personally motivated band, financed by the stage star who earned \$20,000 a year at a time when the average worker took home \$250.

After depicting the crime Bryan examines the major conspiracy theories in a sustained and scholarly manner. He carefully presents their positions, then he attacks their factual basis or grievous lack thereof to show they spurn the

uncomfortable reality of the murder facts to promote their theories. No larger conspiracy stands behind the small Booth group.

Bryan could have strengthened his narrative with more discussion of the military's investigation, but this was not his central focus. He also could have added to his picture of Booth's hand picked confederates, social misfits, men of limited intelligence, incompetent, inexperienced, and cowardly. No larger group of conspirators even in a whiskey haze would have picked these societal dregs for a strike at the heart of government. It certainly would not have selected the poorly-armed--a single-shot cap-fired derringer--narcissistic, emotion wracked Booth, as its trigger man.

Unfortunately Professor Hanchett's introduction gratuitously embraces a recent theory on Lincoln's murder to provide the reader with an alternate view! Bryan would made short shrift of that one too.