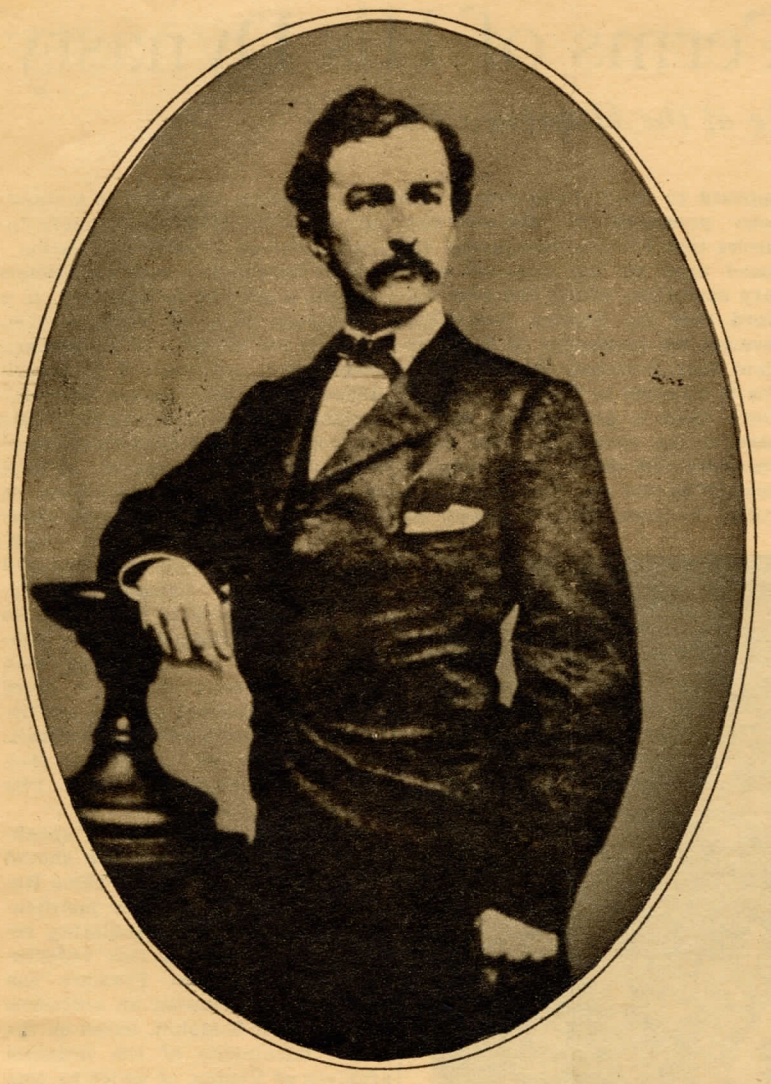


John Wilkes Booth.

In Justice to John Wilkes Booth

Francis Wilson Disentangles Fact From Legend in the Tragic History of Edwin Booth's Younger Brother

JOHN WILKES BOOTH. Fact and Fiction of Lincoln's Assassination. By Francis Wilson. With Illustrations. 322 pp. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. $4.50.

By POULTNEY BIGELOW

WILKES BOOTH killed Lincoln without any hope of reward. It was the act of a fanatic, an enthusiast, a morbid mind. He paid the penalty within a few days, for he was pursued by a posse of United States cavalry, who had the strictest orders to secure his person alive, bring him to Washington, then have him executed at the gallows. The barn in which he was hiding was completely surrounded. Escape was impossible. He refused to surrender; the building was then set on fire and, had he not shot himself, he would have been burned alive. His last words were caught by one of his Northern captors, "Tell mother I died for my country!"

Francis Wilson writes not in justification of murder, much less in justification of the monumental crime on Good Friday of 1865. His task is the thankless but important one of telling the truth to his fellow-citizens North and South and of at last sweeping aside as infectious rubbish much legendary material born of hatred, suspicion and political vindictiveness.

The historian must be gifted with imagination who attempts to reconstruct the atmosphere of political savagery that prevailed then in our Northern press, in our Congress, and even in the Cabinet of President Lincoln. We Northerners talked of our brother Christians beyond the Potomac as rebels, because they attempted to secede, much as the thirteen American Colonies did in 1776. George III ordered his Generals to burn such of our towns as had harbored "disloyals," and from 1861 to 1865 Lincoln was Commander-in-Chief of an army whose practices did not differ materially from those of the eighteenth century King. And the Southern States, on their part, fought with desperation as men defending their homes and property.

Another important factor, psychological also, in building up the background against which Booth's crime was committed, was that during the Civil War the newspapers teemed with tales of cruelty to prisoners. We of the North heard incessantly of Andersonville and the horrible waste of life there through inhuman treatment. These tales were so welcome to the Northern press that when our troops finally reached that neighborhood in 1865 the prison governor, Captain Wirz, was hanged by lynch law disguised as court-martial. Wilkes Booth knew the other side. He knew many families who had sons or husbands wasting away in prisons up North. And General Grant's drastic order forbidding the exchange of prisoners must have added fuel to the fire of resentment by which he was consumed.

Mr. Wilson leaves us no room to doubt that Booth believed himself actuated by a high and noble purpose in planning his deed. The original plan called for Lincoln's abduction, not his assassination. By that means he expected to bring about the abrogation of Grant's order as to prisoners, and to strengthen the cry of the Northern Democrats that "The war is a failure." He believed he would thus perform a service for the entire country—preserve the independence of the South and bring the bloodshed to an end.

Prior to Appomattox the thought of assassination had apparently not entered Booth's head. His sealed letter to John S. Clarke, written in November, 1864, contains the words: "Nor do I deem it a dishonor in attempting to make for her [the South] a prisoner of this man to whom she owes so much misery."

It was two days after Lee's surrender that Booth heard Lincoln speak to the crowd that surged about the Executive Mansion on his return from the front. He heard the President say: "It is also unsatisfactory to some that the elective franchise is not given to the colored man. I would myself prefer that it were conferred on the very intelligent and on those who serve our country as soldiers."

The spectre of negro enfranchisement was the last straw for Booth, already plunged into darkest despair by Lee's surrender. He turned to his companion, Lewis Payne, and muttered, "This is the last speech he will ever make."

There is no need to recount here the familiar story of the assassination itself and of the chase which followed, but it is interesting to note that Mr. Wilson corrects the common assumption that Booth shouted "Sic semper tyrannis!" from the stage after leaping from the President's box. He himself wrote in his diary that "I shouted 'Sic semper' before I fired," and Mr. Wilson was informed by W. J. Ferguson, an actor in the cast on the night of the murder, who saw Booth jump, that Booth did not speak after leaping to the stage.

Booth's abrupt awakening to the hideousness of his act was pitiful.

> He was astounded [writes Mr. Wilson] to find that he was seemingly alone in his belief in the necessity for his murderous act, astounded that no word of commendation was being uttered in his behalf by people, North and South, who had cried aloud against Lincoln. It was then that bitter disillusion came to John Wilkes Booth. He became appalled at the enormity of his crime. In his diary at this time he wrote: "I am sure there is no pardon for me in the heavens, since man condemns me so. * * * I have only heard what has been done, and it fills me with horror. God try and forgive me and bless my mother."

The crime was of a sort new in the annals of political violence. The fanatic who killed William the Silent at Delft was encouraged by royal offers of money and titles; Guy Fawkes, who was caught while preparing to murder his king and hundreds of innocent people, did so for the sake of his Church. The deed of Wilkes Booth stands almost alone in that its author had no religious or personal animosity against his victim; he had no abettors or instigators; he had everything to lose and nothing to gain. He was earning more than $20,000 a year in the theatre; he had fame and social position. There is little ground for believing, as Mr. Wilson points out, that a craving for notoriety had anything to do with his act.

Another legend of which this book effectively disposes is that belief which so long persisted, that Booth was never captured, but lived on for years in the Southwest. That ghost can never be raised again in the face of the evidence here assembled.

Francis Wilson has invaded a field poisoned by more than half a century of defamatory propaganda, and emerged triumphant. He has rewritten a chapter in our history which demanded revision. That the task should have been performed by a brother actor, and a friend of Edwin Booth, is the more fitting.

East and West Weighed in the Balance

ORIENTAL AND OCCIDENTAL CULTURE. By Maurice Parmelee. Illustrated. 379 pp. New York: The Century Company. $4.

By CHARLES JOHNSTON

MAURICE PARMELEE has written several books, one of which advocates a return to nature in the matter of clothing. It would therefore be permissible to take a name from the early Greek accounts of India and call him a modern gymnosophist. But a better description would be a materialistic or agnostic idealist, with an exceptionally fair mind and with many generous and humane impulses; a studious traveler who sees without prejudice and who is a diligent searcher of statistical tables. His general purpose is a happy, peaceful mankind, not divided into hostile sections, but united on the broadest possible basis of common ancestry and inheritance. And he has undertaken a protracted pilgrimage through the lands of the Orient with the express purpose of gleaning a harvest of cultural ideas and emotions for the enrichment of Occidental minds, with the hope of establishing a general fund of thoughts and feelings for the whole human race. It is a generous purpose, and he is in certain ways well endowed to make it a reality.

Fairness of mind, which always takes pains to see and understand the opposite side of any question, is a rare quality, and he possesses it in an exceptional degree. This breadth of view is well illustrated in his consideration of what is at the moment one of the chief bones of contention between Orient and Occident, namely: the problem of extraterritoriality in China. Mr. Parmelee begins by enumerating the disadvantages in China involved in the institution of foreign courts for foreigners in Chinese territory. These disadvantages are: Derogation of national sovereignty; the fact that Chinese are compelled to deal with foreign courts when they go to law with foreigners; the unfair advantage of foreign-born Chinese who have acquired citizenship abroad; inevitable bias for, or against, rival legal systems and so on. He then makes a list of disadvantages to foreigners, such as the limitation of privilege in parts of China outside the foreign concessions; the fact that the consular officials who preside in the extra-territorial courts are not trained judicial officers; that these courts have not the right to compel the testimony of Chinese witnesses and so forth. And, after thus fairly weighing and comparing both sides, and putting on record the views of thoughtful Chinese and foreigners, he reaches a conclusion which is not quite that of either side, but is fair to both: that these courts must ultimately disappear, because they are a limitation of sovereignty; but that China must first develop a system of law and procedure which will insure even-handed justice to foreigners, a system like that of Japan and modern Turkey, based on Western legal principles. Incidentally, it may be said that one of the most entertaining and at the same time illuminating passages in the book is the description of how the author came within the meshes of the Chinese legal system when he somewhat rashly crossed the lines at Canton during the strike against foreign merchants, especially the British. It was a harrowing experience, but Mr. Parmelee bore himself well:

> I was cool and self-controlled. But I remembered later that the palms of my hands were damp with perspiration due to the severe nervous strain, the effects of which I felt for some time thereafter. It aroused in me a temporary distaste for China and the Chinese. There seemed to be something cold and almost inhuman in the Chinese character.

Nevertheless, his general view of Chinese life and institutions is broad and sympathetic.

Equally fair is his treatment of another difficult problem: the industrial expansion of Japan, with the danger of international friction when Japan comes into active rivalry with the great industrial nations of the Occident. While Mr. Parmelee is fully cognizant of the immense strides of modern industrialism, and of its remarkable conquests, he is no worshiper of the machine age. He sees the decline of rural life with genuine concern and regret, and feels and eloquently expresses a humane sympathy with the often hard lot of factory workers, cut off, for the most part, from contact with nature and

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John Wilkes Booth as Hamlet