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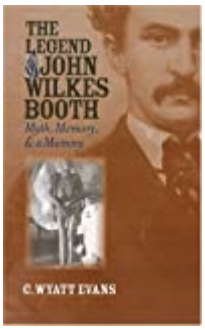

C. Wyatt Evans. *The Legend of John Wilkes Booth: Myth, Memory, and a Mummy.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. xv + 269 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1352-6.

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John Wilkes Booth's Final Role

With the excellent work that has been done on the memory of the Civil War in the last twenty years by Gaines M. Foster, Thomas Connelly, Barbara Bellows, Gary Gallagher, Alan T. Nolan, and others, one might be tempted to conclude that this line of inquiry has nearly reached its end.[1] But as it turns out, such a conclusion would be just as premature as when James Randall suggested in his 1937 AHA keynote speech that there was nothing more to be written about Abraham Lincoln. C. Wyatt Evans's very fine new book *The Legend of John Wilkes Booth: Myth, Memory, and a Mummy* gives an intriguing new wrinkle to the story of the Lost Cause and to our understanding of the memory of the Civil War.

Evans's volume is centered on the story of a man named David E. George, a drifter who committed suicide in the small-but-growing Oklahoma town of Enid in 1903. Thanks to the efforts of a handful of individuals–some who bent the truth unknowingly, others who did so deliberately–a great many Americans came to believe that the dead man was in fact the infamous John Wilkes Booth, who ostensibly had escaped the Union armies and the bullet of Sgt. Boston Corbett to lead a long life under an assumed identity. On first examination, the existence of the "Booth mummy" might seem a triviality, a footnote to history, but Wyatt adeptly weaves together his evidence to make the case that the mummy, in fact, serves as a symbol of much larger tensions in American society.

In his analysis of "one of the first instances of modern American conspiracy thinking" (p. 138), Evans strives to understand the different, and often contradictory, reasons that Americans continued to believe that Booth had survived. Often, belief broke down along sectional lines. For many Northern believers, the conspiracy theory and the mummy served as a way of exploring their fascination with death and reliving the tragedy of Lincoln's murder. For Southerners, Booth was another symbol of defiance in the face of the federal government, around which "old unreconstructeds" could rally. For Westerners, particularly the denizens of Enid, the fact that the worldly but rebellious actor had chosen a frontier town as his ultimate destination allowed them to affirm their own self-image as worldly and rebellious.

As the twentieth century unfolded, the meanings at-

tached to "Booth" evolved. For anti-modernists, Evans argues, he became an illustration of what had gone wrong with America, of history gone awry. For populists, he became an example of the inefficacy of the federal government, which could not perform even so simple a task as bringing Booth to justice. And for white supremacists, who believed ancient Egyptians to be white people, the mummy became a symbol of Americans' interconnectedness with the distant past and the tribes of Israel. In this worldview, the connection suggested the ancient origins and thus inherent superiority of the white race.

Having examined the litany of uses for which the Booth mummy has served, Evans concludes by situating his work in the broader historiography of memory. He argues that in the official versus vernacular dichotomy first outlined by John Bodnar, oppositional countermemories (the vernacular) have generally been seen by historians as somewhat noble and heroic.[2] Evans's work makes the important point that this is not always so, and that "the legend's greatest lesson to the present is how subgroups in American culture appropriate deeply symbolic events for harmful purposes" (p. 218).

Climbing into the heads of people who may not have understood their own motivations naturally requires a bit of guesswork. As such, some readers may find the book a bit too speculative for their tastes. For this reader, however, the main disappointment was that Evans gave only cursory examination to the links between the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations and conspiracy theories (pp. 202-207). Ever since that fateful November afternoon in 1963, many Americans have searched almost desperately for connections between the two crimes–"Booth was born in 1838, Oswald in 1938," etc. Had Evans lent his considerable insight to examining this impulse, it would have added a welcome dimension to his argument.

The Legend of John Wilkes Booth: Myth, Memory, and a Mummy is a challenging book, and so would not be appropriate for, say, an undergraduate course. Beyond the densely worded prose, getting a full appreciation of Evans's ideas requires a firm grasp of much knowledge beyond the Civil War. The book draws, for example, on the work of sociologists like Gary Alan Fine, on the historiography of Christian millennialism, on French thinkers of the 1930s, and on many others bodies of thought. But for those with advanced training, the book will be a useful addition to the literature on the memory of the Civil War.

Notes

[1]. See Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause and the Emergence of the New South, 1865-1913* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Thomas L. Connelly and Barbara Bellows, *God and General Longstreet: The Lost Cause and the Southern Mind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); and, Gary Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000).

[2]. See John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

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