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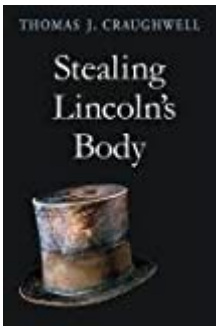

Thomas J. Craughwell. *Stealing Lincoln's Body.* Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008. 288 pp. $14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-03039-8.

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Counterfeiters, Grave Robbers, and the Bizarre Plot to Steal President Lincoln's Body

President Abraham Lincoln signed the Legal Tender Act, authorizing the issue of some $150,000,000 in treasury notes (the famous greenbacks) on February 25, 1862. His so doing allowed the government to pay its debts, resolved a banking crisis, and placed an invaluable new circulating medium into the economy. Unlike the notes issued by the Confederate government, the circulating medium that Lincoln authorized was required to be accepted at face value for most debts, public or private. The greenbacks were consequently a great success: they held their value, they were instrumental in keeping the North's economy afloat, and they enabled the Union to escape the runaway inflation that weakened the South so severely.

Still, there were several problems with the greenbacks. One, perhaps minor in retrospect, involved none other than Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase. Long convinced that he was better presidential material than Lincoln, he was determined to prove that such was the case in 1864. To help in that cause, and in advancing his own name familiarity, Chase made sure to have his likeness placed on the one dollar bill, knowing that his image would reach an especially large pool of potential voters. Chase's plans, however, did not work out; he was kicked out of the cabinet just prior to Lincoln's successful reelection in 1864 (although he then soon became chief justice of the United States Supreme Court).

A more serious "greenback problem," and one eloquently elaborated on by Thomas J. Craughwell's lively prose in *Stealing Lincoln's Body*, was that of counterfeiting, which the greenbacks very quickly elevated into a major new growth industry (Craughwell estimates that, by 1864, half of all paper currency in the North was bogus). Consequently, the Secret Service was created to combat this problem (William P. Wood was sworn in as its first director on July 4, 1865), and it did so rather effectively over the long haul. By 1903, Craughwell suggests that only about one of every one hundred thousand paper dollars in circulation was counterfeit.

While achieving such a reduction in the circulation of "funny money," Superintendent Wood's agents (and

those serving under later directors as well) obviously made numerous arrests. One of these netted a fellow by the name of Benjamin Boyd, who was apprehended in 1876 and sent to the Illinois State Prison at Joliet. While most counterfeiters were native-born Americans, Boyd was connected with a group of Irish American practitioners of that trade who were centered in Chicago. Now, minus Boyd's considerable engraving skills, those folks faced increasing difficulties in passing wares of lesser quality. Thus, the plot was hatched, initially in the Windy City, to kidnap President Lincoln's body and to demand (from Illinois's governor) two hundred thousand dollars in ransom money and Boyd's release for its return.

Space limitations prevent a detailing of all the machinations leading eventually to the actual body snatching attempt, but Craughwell covers all of these with flair, while even adding insightful sidebars on Chicago's Irish American community, on methods of embalming and counterfeiting, and especially on grave robbing. As the main story develops, though, "the deed" was finally scheduled for November 7, 1876, the night of the Rutherford B. Hayes-Samuel J. Tilden presidential contest, a time when streets would be crowded with celebrants, and strangers would not be noticed, in either Springfield or at its nearby Oak Ridge Cemetery. On the appointed evening, three men–coconspirators Terrence Mullen and Jack Hughes along with informant Lewis Swegles–actually broke the single security padlock at the Lincoln Monument, entered the vault where Lincoln was entombed, and began removing the casket. Its weight, however, was enormous. They were making little progress, and Swelges was consequently sent to get assistance from a fourth conspirator (not yet present on the scene) who had been assigned the task of handling the wagon needed to haul Lincoln's body to its planned hiding place (among the Indiana dunes on the far side of Lake Michigan). Swegles, instead, went directly to the monument's Memorial Hall (which was heated on this cold November night) and alerted authorities (some six men total) hiding there that the grave robbery was actually in progress. In the ensuing rush to make their arrests, one of these six, Pinkerton detective George Hay, accidentally fired his weapon, alerting Mullen and Hughes who escaped and eluded authorities until arrested several days later back in Chicago. Charged with larceny and conspiracy (at the time more serious offences in Illinois than grave robbing), Mullen and Hughes were tried in late May of 1877. Found guilty, they were sentenced to one year in the Illinois State Prison at Joliet.

This incarceration, however, completes only a bit over half of Craughwell's story. His narrative resumes in mid-November of 1876, when for reasons of security in the wake of recent events, five men, including John Todd Stuart and John C. Power (respectively Lincoln's first law partner and the then custodian of Lincoln's tomb), removed Lincoln's body from its sarcophagus to place it secretly in an unmarked grave deep in the monument's basement. This plan was foiled, however, as Power, who was doing the actual digging at the new grave site, struck water and the coffin was then, of necessity, simply hidden, initially under a pile of scrap lumber. Its whereabouts, known only to a group of nine known as the Lincoln Guard of Honor, remained a secret for a decade. Then, on April 14, 1887, in a private ceremony attended by only some eighteen or nineteen observers, the Lincolns (Abraham and Mary, who had died on July 16, 1882) and three of their four sons were buried in a secure brick vault in the catacomb at Oak Ridge Cemetery. Robert, their sole surviving son, however, remained concerned that even this internment was not sufficiently secure. Finally, in yet another ceremony on September 26, 1901, his parents and siblings were put to rest in a ten-foot deep concrete vault.

When the Civil War was only getting started in the fall of 1861, *London Times* correspondent William Howard Russell had opined that President Lincoln was to be pitied, faced, as he was, with trying "to understand strategy, naval warfare, big guns, the movements of troops, military maps, reconnoissances, occupations, interior and exterior lines, and all the technical details of the art of slaying."[1] Later, during the fall of 1863 while referring to some negative press regarding his thoughts on William Shakespeare, Lincoln confided that such comments actually represented " 'a fair specimen of what has occurred to me through life. I have endured a great deal of ridicule without much malice; and have received a great deal of kindness, not quite free from ridicule. I am used to it.' "[2]

Russell reminds us of the travail of the Lincoln presidency, and Lincoln himself was clearly well aware of the many problems that he faced throughout his entire life. Craughwell's well-told story now informs us that Lincoln, our greatest national icon, was never to be really free from "problems" even following his death.

Notes

[1]. William Howard Russell, *My Diary North and South*, ed. Fletcher Pratt (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 256.

[2]. Abraham Lincoln to James H. Hackett, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 6:558-559.

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