



Worst Seat in the House: Henry Rathbone's Front Row View of the Lincoln Assassination

Caleb Jenner Stephens

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On April 14, 1865 John Wilkes Booth changed the world with a single bullet. The assassination of Abraham Lincoln had many repercussions and for Henry Rathbone they were profound. Henry was the only man to confront Booth and attempt to apprehend the assassin. Henry was also the man that let Booth escape. While Henry wasn't officially blamed for allowing John Wilkes Booth to kill Abraham Lincoln, he blamed himself. After the assassination the vivid memories of Lincoln's death and failure to capture Booth caused Henry's mind to unravel. He traveled the world with his young family looking for an escape from his past. In 1883, eighteen years after the assassination, Henry's tortured mind reached its limit. In the early hours of Christmas Eve Henry murdered his wife, shooting and stabbing her multiple times in a fashion reminiscent of Lincoln's assassination. In Worst Seat in the House follow the life of Henry Rathbone from his childhood through the Civil War, the assassination and his final years in a German insane asylum. In this biography and case study of a man dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder, see how the events of Henry's life created the man he finally became. Place yourself into the mind of Henry Rathbone and ask yourself how you would cope with failing the world?

Worst Seat in the House: Henry Rathbone's Front Row View of the Lincoln Assassination Details

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Cindy says

I have never given a thought to whom might of been sitting with President Lincoln and his wife on the night of the assassination. Henry Rathbone's life changed dramatically as a result of being the Lincoln's guest at the play. This book focuses on the effect of the assassination on Henry and how one traumatic event can cause PTSD.

Alicia says

I thought this book had a great concept. Personally, I was unaware that the Lincoln's shared their box with another couple. The author raises many great points, such as in today's world of social media. Henry Rathbone would have become an instant celebrity. His story would have been all over the internet and TV in a matter of minutes. Unfortunately, in 1865, very little information was gathered about Henry. Due to this fact, the author does make a lot of speculation on what may have happened and what may have been going on through the mind of Rathbone. It was a little disappointing that there were not more facts but I do give the author credit for giving alternate theories on various incidents. Showing how Henry experienced symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, was very interesting and has shown how far we have come in medical advancements. This is an interesting read and a different view of one of the American's most famous historical events. 3.5/5 Stars

James Crabtree says

While everyone almost everyone knows the circumstances of Lincoln's assassination at Ford's Theater, how he was killed, who the perpetrator was, etc., very few know that the Lincolns had company that fateful night. The story of Maj. Henry Rathbone and Clara Harrison only adds to the tragedy that was Lincoln's fate.

Maj. Rathbone was a New Yorker, a man of some means who nevertheless volunteered for duty during the Civil War and did not seek to use his political connections to get the command of a regiment as so many other affluent New Yorkers had done. He was satisfied with a captain's commission and took part in many of the battles fought by the Army of the Potomac. By the end of the war he was assigned to Washington D.C. and since his wife-to-be was a friend of Mary Todd Lincoln he and Clara were invited to join the Lincolns for a performance of Our American Cousin. When Booth shot the President it was Rathbone who attempted to capture the man, receiving a serious wound in the arm from a hunting knife that the assassin had with him. His efforts may, or may not, have resulted in Booth's own injury upon dropping to the stage.

The histories that even mention that much usually leaves Henry and Clara to disappear into history. However, for them the story didn't end there. In his efforts to release Booth's "bar" at the door and to remain close to the President as he lived the last hours of his life Rathbone neglected his own injury, which led to a serious blood loss. Clara rushed him to her father's nearby house where he would be physically incapacitated for some time.

But what of his psychological injuries? Stephens pushes hard for a diagnosis of PTSD in Rathbone... a

problem which would result in madness for the man with horrible results many years later. In fact, the author pushes a little TOO hard for his view of PTSD, letting it creep in throughout the book and making it hard to really get a feel for Rathbone as a man rather than a victim. This defect in the book is compounded by issues with the layout (no page numbers for the chapters) and some grammatical errors. There are photos and other illustrations in the book but they often seem misplaced or irrelevant. I did think that the discussion of where Rathbone was actually seated in the box and whether he could have stopped Booth before he shot Lincoln is relevant and worth further discussion but there are several explanations which would make allow for Rathbone's seating and his testimony that he was watching the play.

If you are interested in the Lincoln assassination I believe this book would make good reading for you. It certainly covers an aspect I have not seen elsewhere.

Chaplain Stanleigh Chapin says

Important history lesson

I had accepted a version of this dramatic event as it was taught in school. My interpretation was incomplete, not actually factional and misconceived.

Trey Mustian says

If you are a history buff and interested in the Lincoln assassination, this is a must-read. This book is meticulously researched and documented. It presents one of the most traumatic events in our nation's history through the perspective of Henry Rathbone and his fiancé Clara who were in the Ford Theater on that fateful night with the Lincolns only by happenstance... or perhaps fate.

Michele Agostinelli says

Couldn't even finish it. I think the first chapter or so would have been enough to explain who he was, what happened to him after the assassination. Just not interesting enough to finish and I love historical fiction/non-fiction.

Jessica says

Although this book was intriguing and I was interested to learn about Henry and Clara Rathbone I was quite disappointed. The structure of the book was confusing and reminded me in several ways (none of them good) of Bill O'Reilly's Killing Lincoln. The author seemed to be more interested in the death of Clara and Lincoln than anything else. In fact when the first chapter or so talked about it I was afraid there was not going to be any discussion of the Rathbone's actual lives. Even so, Clara is subjected to only being a victim and is never explored in her own right.

The book also focuses quite extensively on PTSD perhaps in order to fill up the gaps in paper trail. The author attempts to retroactively diagnose Henry Rathbone with PTSD and fills his whole book with

assumptions and phrases such as "undoubtedly" without any substantive proof. Although the author probably had the best intentions to shed light on PTSD, he instead fuels the fire regarding that people with PTSD are frequently violent.

Overall, although the topic is very interesting it is hard to figure out whether this book is intended to be a light historical read, an academic volume or a psychological evaluation.

Zeb Kantrowitz says

What effect would there be on you if you might have stopped John Wilkes Booth from assassinating President Lincoln, or at least capturing him? On the night of April 14, 1865 Major Henry Rathbone and his fiancée were guests of the Lincolns at Ford's Theater. Having been in battle during the Civil War, Rathbone was familiar with weapons and killing. But, Booth stabbed him in his left arm cutting him from elbow to shoulder. Bleeding heavily, Rathbone couldn't hold onto Booth who then escaped.

Rathbone, who was always 'frail' of mind, from that day forward began to deteriorate. Stephens tries (and does a reasonable job) to make the case that Rathbone was suffering from a case of PTSD. Though its' gone by many names, Soldier's Heart in the Civil War, Shell Shock in WW1, and Battle Fatigue in WW2, since Vietnam its' been called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In the latest DSM (Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders) PTSD is included in the Anxiety/Panic Spectrum.

No longer is PTSD considered the result of battle, but it also can be caused by other traumas such as concussions, auto accidents, and being involved in bombings or hostage situations. Stephens makes that case that Rathbone carried 'survivor's guilt' from being unable to save Lincoln or stop Booth. We are all familiar with the saying, 'It weighed heavy on his mind'. For someone who had a fragile personality to begin with, years of guilt could lead to insanity.

Since there was no treatment or even understanding of what Rathbone was going through, it would be years of deteriorating thought that finally pushed him over the edge. He and his wife and children (2 boys and a girl) began spending winters in Hanover Germany and summers in Washington, DC. Because he was having 'spells', time in which he was heavily depressed or suffered anxiety attacks, the family began to spend more and more time in Europe.

Rathbone continued to deteriorate and developed a strong paranoia about people trying to kill him. He began sleeping with a gun under his pillow and carried it everywhere. He suspected that his wife Harriet would take his beloved children away from him (as family and friends suggested). On the day before Christmas in 1884, Rathbone murdered his wife and stabbed himself repeatedly. He survived to spend his last twenty-seven years in a mental asylum in Hanover. His children were raised by his wife's brother. Interesting story.

Zeb Kantrowitz
zworstblog.blogspot.com

Jason Parent says

Used for research purposes... A little too much conjecture, but loaded with useful facts.

Melinda Borie says

Brilliant idea for a book but the execution was sloppy. There may not have been enough material to make a complete book, here, but the biographical facts that were present were the best parts. The places where this book faltered were the ones in which it veered too much toward speculation, stretching to make arguments, and felt somewhat like a term paper in historical psychology. This editorializing added a lot of unnecessary padding to an interesting story.

Chip Carman says

A great read. It's about the man in the room with Lincoln when he is assassinated. He marries the woman he went to the theater, goes mad and kills her. And spent the rest of his life in an insane asylum in Europe. Great for fans of Lincoln. What a back story!

Ionia says

Being just a tad bit of a Lincoln junkie, I knew when I saw this book that I had to read it. This book, for me, was a cut above the rest before I even opened the cover, as it actually recognised the important roles of Major Rathbone and his future wife, Clara Harris. This is very unusual for any account of Lincoln's assassination.

Right away this was an interesting and different perspective of a tragedy that has been covered countless times before. Mr. Stephens did a good job researching his subject matter and put together a historical account that has not already been written in one form or another. Rather than making this just another simple account of Lincoln's death, he took the time to put forth ideas about how the event affected those closest to the former President, especially Henry Rathbone, in later years.

His use of retelling the story of John Wilkes Booth and Lincoln's activity on the day of the shooting was limited to a brief recount of the events and was relevant to the main point in this work. Henry Rathbone may well have suffered with PTSD which eventually became completely out of control, causing him to make some very unwise choices and ultimately become his own undoing.

I appreciated that the author took the time to explore the relationship between Henry Rathbone and his wife after the assassination and did not end where most books on the subject of Lincoln do--at the time of death. I think this book is important to those who are scholars of this subject, and for future generations. I agree with his assessment that had things in the 1800's been as they are now with social media and internet, the roles of Henry and Clara would not have been so easily ignored or erased. It was refreshing to see someone take the time to explore this subject and the lives of two people that history has nearly forgotten.

The author does speculate some, here is an example: "The house may have stirred up memories of his father, which mixed with those of Lincoln." If I had to choose single fault with this book, the speculation of the author in certain places would be it. Still, I can't imagine getting to know someone's life so well through documents and photos and not feeling the urge to insert a little "What might they have been thinking." The speculation was not over the top.

There are plenty of photos in this book as well, and each of them support the story.

Overall, I thought this was a well researched, well constructed historical account with a lot of research hours compiled into it. If you are a historian, or someone who enjoys reading accounts of the past with a different spin, this book would be a great choice.

This review is based on a complimentary copy from the publisher and provided through Netgalley. All opinions are my own.

Wesley says

I didn't even know there were other people in the box with the Lincoln's, let alone that they had such an interesting story! Find the whole review on my blog: <http://libraryeducated.blogspot.com/2...>

Mel Foster says

I was definitely intrigued by Rathbone's story. Mr. Stephens has done a significant amount of research on the subject. I suspect would be great as a lecturer or leading a conversation.

If this had been a first draft, I would have been very impressed. But this book needs the hand of a firm editor. Dangling participles and sentence fragments are too frequent. An example of the former: "Rising to meet the killer at the door, the quick actions of Booth would have caught Rathbone by surprise. . . ." An example of the latter: He was baiting Stanton, and when the Secretary blindly asked why the President would "ask such a question" (p 69). Wordiness is a problem. Parts are well polished. Other parts read like a researcher's interior monologue.

Mr. Stephens struggles with voice. He wants to be both present and self-effacingly objective. This dilemma results in such sentences as "As a man who dealt with overwhelmingly traumatic stress as an adult, it's important to analyze the first portentous circumstance of childhood"(p37).

Much of the focus of the book is on PTSD. Sometimes the PTSD discussion seems to wag the historical dog. The strange assertion is made in the beginning of the book that "In the 1800s, death was much more prevalent than it is today. Disease and accidents challenged the medicine of the time, and the passing of family members, especially those in younger stages of life, was relatively typical" (p 38). At this point Mr. Stephens is de-emphasizing the effect of Henry's father's death on the boy. But later on he makes the argument that PTSD was a bigger problem as a result of the Civil War than of any other conflict in the U.S. At this later point he asserts that the young men fighting in the Civil War "had limited life experience. They had little or no experience with death, mortality, and the grieving process" (p 136). I'm not an expert logician, but those two arguments seem at loggerheads to me.

In conclusion, I lapsed into teacher mode during much of my reading of this book, coaxing out meaning and mentally editing for clarity. Hence, it was not as enjoyable as it could have been.

What will probably stay with me the longest is the fact that over 15,000 books have been written about Lincoln or his wife. I could read a book a week for 300 years!

This is the first edition of the first book by a relatively young author. So there may be reason to be optimistic

about future works or editions.
