

Books of Special Interest

Lincoln's Slayer

JOHN WILKES BOOTH. By FRANCIS WILSON. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1929. \$4.50.

Reviewed by J. RANKEN TOWSE

IT may be questioned whether, at this late date, there was any crying necessity for a fresh rehearsal of the tragedy of John Wilkes Booth, or whether this latest account of it has any great value, historical or other. Sixty-four years have elapsed since the horrible and insensate deed that shocked the whole civilized world. The furious and bitter political passions of that fast receding period have long since abated, all the protagonists in the stirring scenes of the national convulsion have passed into the beyond, and the noble victim of the wretched assassin holds secure an immortality in the revering memories of his countrymen. Booth himself has become a fading figure in the gathering mists of oblivion. It is to these that he might most contentedly be resigned. In the past, every feature of his character and his crime has been discussed in minutest detail. His latest biographer, Francis Wilson, the deservedly popular comedian, of course has nothing that is at once new and important to tell, and his work, not unreasonably, might be curtly dismissed, as one of supererogation.

But his book, though somewhat diffuse, repetitive, and disjointed, is not without certain absolute merits. It is, at least, a conscientious and laborious compendium of all known and authoritative records, contains a lot of pleasant, contributory, and not impertinent gossip, is written with a good deal of kindly and judicious observation, and with its compilation of legally proved facts—still occasionally disputed—may, perhaps, give the *coup de grace* to some of the ridiculous rumors set afloat from time to time by the mischievous or the ignorant. And, doubtless, it will find interested readers among those of the younger generations having only the most casual acquaintance with events that happened before they were born. It should be added that they will not be misinformed as to the ac-

tual facts, for Mr. Wilson, if not altogether uninfluenced by his long theatrical environment, is an honest and trustworthy compiler.

To traverse, once again, in this review the well-beaten ground that he covers is unnecessary and would, inevitably, be tedious. The main purpose of his book, in so far as it is not strictly biographical, is to give expression to his own estimate—which, probably, does not differ greatly from that of most intelligent and unbiased observers—of the character and motives of the unhappy Wilkes Booth. Without for a moment trying to extenuate the senseless and brutal atrocity of Lincoln's murder—his admiration of the martyred president is fervent and unmistakable—he argues that Booth was not, fundamentally, of the stuff of which the common assassin is made, but an egotistical, purblind, and fanatical zealot, maddened at the last by the desperation of a lost cause, and by an utter misapprehension of the true nature of the national situation and of the really magnanimous and philanthropic part that his victim was playing in it. He insists strongly upon the undisputed fact that the besotted young actor, in the beginning of his conspiracy, contemplated only the abduction of Lincoln—a design that does not appear so completely preposterous when it is remembered how reckless the latter was of personal danger—and that it was only when he heard of the proposal to enfranchise the negroes of the South that he resolved, maniacally, to assassinate the man whom he crazily regarded as chiefly responsible for the calamities and sufferings that had befallen the rebellious states. In his egregious folly he persuaded himself that should he succeed in killing Lincoln, he would be hailed with acclamation in the South as a modern Brutus, the savior of his country from a malignant tyrant. His speedy disillusionment when, as a crippled, starving, hopeless fugitive, he found himself the object of universal execration, brought him to a realization of the enormity of his deed and impelled him to the resolution never to be taken alive. Mr. Wilson, evidently, inclines to the opinion, strongly supported by

circumstances, that the bullet that killed him came from his own, not Corbett's, pistol. An investigation by modern gunnery experts would leave no doubt on a question of that sort.

The stupendous folly of Booth's act—almost equal to its iniquity—is, perhaps, the best evidence that can be produced in support of the theory of his mental irresponsibility, that drink and desperation had made him a madman. But it does not constitute irrefragable proof. It must not be forgotten that he was capable of planning other murders than the one he himself committed. From time immemorial assassins, even when the direst of blunders, have professed themselves to be righteous avengers. And mistaken judgment is by no means a valid defense for murder, let alone assassination. Booth was no fool. There is abundant and convincing testimony that, normally, he was a kindly, genial, highly attractive man. That he had natural abilities of an uncommon kind is amply illustrated by his early successes upon the stage. It is noteworthy that he excelled in romantic and melodramatic characters. Such, for instance, as Romeo, Pescara, and Claude Melnoth. There is nothing to indicate that he was superior or equal to his brother, Edwin. Presumably he was emotional and temperamental. That he was egotistical to an abnormal degree is revealed in his own diaries. A misguided fanatic in politics, schooled in an atmosphere of romance, his egotism helped him confound the horrible with the heroic. He dreamed of deathless fame and achieved a hideous notoriety. Crazy, in one sense, he certainly was, as certainly as he was one of the most lamentable marplots of the ages.

Indian Customs

THE RAIN MAKERS. By MARY ROBERTS COOLIDGE. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1929.

Reviewed by MARY AUSTIN

SOONER or later, such a book as this was due to be written. The growing interest in the Indian as a source of entertainment, and properly understood, intellectual profit, has led to the multiplying of books of impressions of him, colored with as much information as the authors could make seem their special prerogative. The peculiar effect the Indian has upon most persons who attain to ever so slight an acquaintance with him as a human being, is to excite the desire in his white friends to claim him as a personal discovery, an especial and exclusive possession. Most of the material relating to his life and customs, presented in books, is so presented, from whatever source it is hastily collected, as to appear the fruit of a fresh and personally conducted inquiry. The result is an appalling tedium in the majority of such books, since the number of writers who can make a second hand garment seem to have been cut to their minds, is limited.

Mary Roberts makes no such claim in "The Rain Makers." The book is frankly an intelligent gleaning from the works of the few authorities on Indian life, and is freely acknowledged to be such. Its material is collected for the most part from government documents, chiefly from the Bureau of Ethnology reports, and is put together with the skill of the practiced documentarian. Thus it manages to make available much that the average reader would have neither the patience nor the skill to find for himself.

This does not imply that Mrs. Coolidge has not been over the ground to which the documents relate, and definitely tied them to visual images and first hand experiences. But wherever it is necessary to go beyond her experience, she is ready in her use of all authentic resources in their native clarity. Her chapters on ceremonial songs and the sacred games and dances are, for this reason, particularly to be commended. I do not at the moment recall any book which gives so comprehensive a survey of the origins of our southwestern peoples in the light of the most recent information about them.

As was probably unavoidable, with this dependence upon collected material, there is much more, and much more pertinent, information about the Pueblos than about the Navajos, the Apaches, the Pimas and Papagoes, and other local groups. One feels that a little wider range of research would have remedied this shortage. There are many more early documents dealing with the Gila River tribes than are mentioned in the otherwise excellent bibliography which is appended. In any case, however, Mrs. Coolidge has produced a useful, one might say an indispensable, book on the Southwest.

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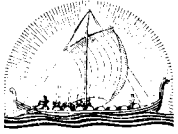
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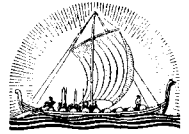
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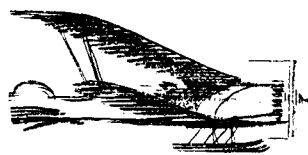
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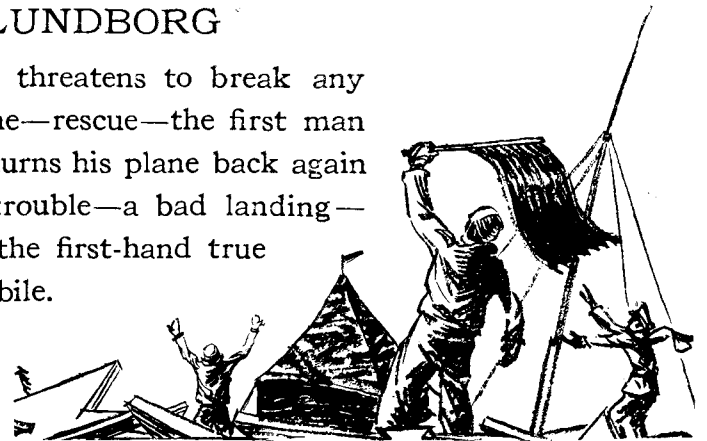
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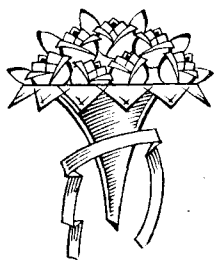
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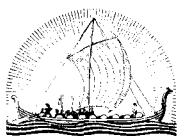
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