



The Madman and the Assassin: The Strange Life of Boston Corbett, the Man Who Killed John Wilkes Booth

By Scott Martelle

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Union cavalryman Boston Corbett became a national celebrity after killing John Wilkes Booth, but as details of his odd personality became known, he also became the object of derision. Over time, he was largely forgotten to history, a minor character in the final act of Booth's tumultuous life. And yet Corbett led a fascinating life of his own, a tragic saga that weaved through the monumental events of nineteenth-century America.

Corbett was an English immigrant and devout Christian who long struggled not only with poverty but also with mental illness, which was likely caused by the mercury he used in his job as a silk hat finisher. He was one of the first volunteers to join the US Army at the outbreak of the Civil War, a path that would in time land him in the notorious Andersonville prison camp. Eventually released, he ended up in the squadron that cornered Lincoln's assassin in a Virginia barn. After the war, he headed west as a homesteader to the plains of Kansas, where his shaky mental health led to his undoing.

The Madman and the Assassin is the first full-length biography of Boston Corbett, a man thrust into the spotlight during a national news event and into an unwelcome transformation from anonymity to fame, and back to obscurity.

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Editorial Review

Review

New York Post "Must read books," March 29, 2015

After receiving a portion of the reward money for bringing Booth to justice, Boston Corbett disappeared from public view and died under mysterious circumstances. Now Martelle delivers the first details many Americans have ever heard about the Union soldier who might be called the Jack Ruby of the 19th century.

The Buffalo News, March 29, 2015

Not another biography of Booth, but the story of a sickly, scurvy-ridden and mentally disturbed Union Army sergeant who shot Booth at close range and later claimed the hand of God had steered the white-hot projectile to its target.

The name of the man nearly lost to history is Boston Corbett, a naturalized American citizen from England. Author Martelle is making a career of little-known historic figures. His last book was a delightful little work on the American ambassador to France who dug up John Paul Jones' bones from under a Parisian laundry.

Boston Globe, April 24, 2015

For the rest of his life, after the moment that defined it -- when he shot and killed the fugitive John Wilkes Booth, who murdered President Lincoln -- ... Boston Corbett faced at least as much hostility as appreciation. Some believed the Union soldier was not a hero but part of a conspiracy to cover up Booth's rumored escape. Others with Confederate sympathies saw Booth as a martyr, and Corbett as the ultimate deceiver. Corbett, meanwhile, struggled to get on with his life, as Scott Martelle details in his shrewd, briskly written chronicle.

Wall Street Journal, April 26, 2015

Mr. Martelle has done an admirable job of researching Corbett's life, combing through archives and period newspapers for every drab of information. What was it about his anti-hero that excited Mr. Martelle's imagination? As the author explains in the book's final pages, it wasn't Corbett's uniqueness but his ordinariness, the fact that he was a "run-of-the-mill American--albeit a strange one--who did his job as a hatter, and then a soldier, and in the process inextricably linked himself with an unforgettable event in American history."

"A curious portrait of a celebrity nonentity caught up in the throes of history." —*Kirkus*

"History buffs will enjoy this fast-paced, well-told addition to the literature on Lincoln and the Civil War." —*Library Journal*

"With the journalist's eye for a telling detail, a historian's ability to unearth an untold tale, and a writer's keen sense of drama, Scott Martelle renders a fascinating portrait of one of the oddest figures to walk across the pages of Civil War history. To the reader's good fortune, Martelle separates myth from the man and

provides a sympathetic, engaging, and authentic portrait of the soldier who killed one of America's most famous assassins." —**James McGrath Morris, author of *Pulitzer* and *The Rose Man of Sing Sing***

"A fascinating look at Boston Corbett, an eccentric who appears at one of the critical junctures in American history. Scott Martelle deftly brings Corbett's nineteenth-century world back to life in his compelling tale of murder and madness." —**Julia Flynn Siler, author of *The House of Mondavi* and *Lost Kingdom***

"Perhaps Martelle's biggest contribution to Lincoln lore is his detailed examination of Corbett's post-Booth life." —Cannonball!!

"Mr. Martelle has done an admirable job of researching Corbett's life. Serious students of the Civil War may be happy to learn more about the obscure oddball who killed the assassin." —*The Wall Street Journal*

About the Author

Scott Martelle, an editorial writer for the Los Angeles Times, is the author of four previous books:

- *The Admiral and the Ambassador: One Man's Obsessive Search for the Body of John Paul Jones* (Chicago Review Press, 2014)
- *Detroit: A Biography* (Chicago Review Press, 2012)
- *The Fear Within: Spies, Commies, and American Democracy on Trial* (Rutgers University Press, 2011)
- *Blood Passion: The Ludlow Massacre and Class War in the American West* (Rutgers University Press, 2007)

A native of Maine, Martelle grew up in Western New York and now lives in Irvine, California.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Theodore Stewart:

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