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BOOKS AND THINGS

By LEWIS GANNETT

WRITTEN like a mystery story, argued with all the insinuating art of a prosecuting attorney harrying a helpless foreigner in court, Otto Eisenschiml's "Why Was Lincoln Murdered?" (Little, Brown, $3.50) offers a sensational rewriting of history.

Why Did Lincoln Die?

"There is not a shred of evidence in existence," Mr. Eisenschiml, a Chicago chemist, admits on page 367, to connect the Radical Republicans with Lincoln's death. Yet his entire book is an effort, by adroit piecing together of circumstance, to place the blame for Lincoln's death on Edwin M. Stanton, Lincoln's hot-tempered Secretary of War, and his associates. Skillfully, Mr. Eisenschiml evades the direct charge; but the plain intent of his book is to implicate Stanton in the plot to murder the great war President; to charge that he, with the aid of his Assistant Secretary, Charles A. Dana, later editor of "The New York Sun," aided Booth in his plan, covered up the traces of this conspiracy and arranged to have the assassin, Booth, shot rather than captured alive in order to avoid exposure. Mr. Eisenschiml even goes so far as to suggest that Andrew Johnson also was privy to the plan; and that Stanton's knowledge of this gave him a sort of blackmailing hold over Lincoln's successor.

This is, of course, preposterous; but so deft is Mr. Eisenschiml's insinuating method of piling up irrelevant details into what appear to be relevant wholes that it is likely to be taken seriously in many quarters. He subtly creates an atmosphere of suspicion in his opening pages, proceeds to ferret out the unsolved ragged fringes and contradictions inevitable in any history of crime, gathers in all the hot-tempered jealousies of war time and weaves them into a pattern which is at first impressive. Then, with deliberate irresponsibility, he makes his avowal that he has not adduced a single bit of evidence which would have standing in any court and again makes his irresponsible syntheses.

The Case Against Stanton

Stanton and his Radical associates, he charges, distrusted Lincoln's moderation; they trusted Johnson more. It would have been to their advantage to have Lincoln out of the way.

As Secretary of War, Stanton was responsible for Lincoln's safety. He failed. He denied Lincoln's request to have Major Eckert, Stanton's husky assistant, accompany him to Ford's Theater on that fateful night. He permitted the assignment of a bodyguard who had a record of drunkenness and violent language in the Washington police force and retained this negligent character even after the murder. He directed the pursuit of the assassin Booth in such a manner that, but for Booth's accidental injury, he might have escaped. He kept Booth's name from the papers for three critical hours, diverting suspicion to the Confederate leaders, and when Booth was surrounded arranged to have him shot rather than captured alive. He kept suspects intimate with him in isolation. And so on, and on, go Mr. Eisenschiml's implicit accusations.

That Stanton was an irascible, arbitrary, vindictive personality is well known. That, he, Eckert, Dana and Andrew Johnson, or any of them, joined in a conspiracy to remove Abraham Lincoln is beyond any reasonable bounds of belief. Nor does the evidence which Mr. Eisenschiml so trickily assembles prove it, or even, rationally examined, suggest it.

Hysteria in 1865

The negligent bodyguard, as a careful reading of Mr. Eisenschiml's suggestive story reveals, was named at the express request of Mrs. Lincoln. Why Mr. Eisenschiml does not include her in his net of insinuations I do not know. Any cub reporter knows how reluctant the authorities of the law are to tell all they know on the instant of the discovery of a crime. When the President had been assassinated and the Secretary of State stabbed and his household massacred, it was natural enough to suspect a Confederate plot. Within five hours of the commission of the crimes, Stanton had detachments on every road



Otto Eisenschiml

out of Washington, including the one which Mr. Eisenschiml thinks insufficiently patrolled, and he had given the name of the assassin to the press. That there were bunglings, hysteria, slips, does not seem strange. It would have been inhuman if there had been none on such a gory night.

Nothing Proved

Our Chicago chemist works up from a mere assassination plot to other and still more preposterous suggestions. He charges that Stanton deliberately restrained the Union armies from following up Lee's forces after Gettysburg in order to prolong the war and exacerbate the national situation, and hampered Grant for similar reasons!

With one part of his story Mr. Eisenschiml has an easy time. In those black days that followed Lincoln's death, Stanton and his associates were in fact vindictive and bitter. The trials of Booth's alleged fellow-conspirators were anything but judicial in temper. If they were not precisely as pictured in the motion picture, "The Prisoner of Shark's Island," they were disgracefully close to it. But the film's picture of war hysteria is easier to accept than Mr. Eisenschiml's subtle suggestions that it was all the work of a guilty Republican murder band determined to cover up its own tracks.

That Mr. Eisenschiml carefully concludes by admitting that he has suggested everything and proved nothing only aggravates the deliberation of his work as an assassinator of dead men's characters.

Out Today

"Midnight On the Desert: Being an Excursion into Autobiography During a Winter in America 1935-1936," by J. B. Priestly (Harpers $3).

"Present Indicative," the autobiography of Noel Coward (Doubleday Doran $3).

"Peruvian Pageant; A Journey in Time," by Blair Niles (Bobbs-Merrill $3.50).

"My India: Reflections of Fifty Years," by Lillian Luker Ashby with Roger Whately (Little, Brown $3).

"Newspapers and the News: An Objective Measurement of Ethical and Unethical Behavior by Representative Newspapers," by Susan M. Kingsbury, Hornell Hart and Associates. Bryn Mawr College Series in Social Economy: Number I. (Putnam $2.50).

"Damien the Leper," by John Farrow (Sheed & Ward $2.50). The Catholic priest who devoted his life to the leper colony on Molokai.

"Royal George," by C. E. Vulliamy (Appleton-Century $4). King George III.

"The United States Army in War and Peace," by Oliver L. Spaulding (Putnam $6). From Bunker Hill to the Argonne.

"Asia's Good Neighbor: We Were Once—Can We Be Again?" by Walter Karig, Washington correspondent of the "Newark Evening News" (Bobbs-Merrill $2.50).

"Our Gallant Madness," by Frederick Palmer (Doubleday, Doran $2.50). America's part in the World War, from a perspective of twenty years.

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