

She Kept The Nest

THE CASE OF MRS. SURRATT: Her Controversial Trial and Execution for Conspiracy in the Lincoln Assassination. By Guy W. Moore. Illustrated. 142 pp. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. \$3.

By HENRY F. GRAFF

A FEW hours after Lincoln was shot, Mary Eugenia Surratt was arrested for complicity in the deed. Less than three months later she was hanged as guilty. In the time that intervened, the wheels of justice had turned inexorably but eccentrically. Mrs. Surratt was not guilty beyond reasonable doubt and Guy W. Moore once again proves it. Since this is the generally held conclusion of historians, here is clearly not a book that can change minds or stir up trouble. But, as a retelling, it has the value of bringing the details up to date with the most recent scholarly evidence.

Mrs. Surratt would naturally have been a suspect even to the most cautious detective. Through her boarding house in Washington had passed John Wilkes Booth and his fellow-conspirators, including her son, John. Thus, as so many were saying, "she kept the nest that hatched the egg." Since it is possible that Mrs. Surratt knew of the abortive original plan to abduct the President, the fact that Booth made a last-minute switch to murder — of which his landlady was in ignorance — made her innocent at law if not necessarily at heart. As a heroine she is, therefore, not appealing or impressive. Her reputation rests on the nation's judicial execution of her.

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NONE of this impugns, of course, the opinion of her confessor that she perished "as innocent of that crime as a babe unborn." Military commissions such as convicted her proved to be in violation of the Constitution; perjured testimony was offered against her; and portions of Booth's diary were suppressed which established beyond quibble that, contrary to the charge, the assassination was not undertaken with the connivance of Confederate officials. In addition, the Judge Advocate failed to show President Johnson the court's recommendation for clemency that might have saved the accused.

Mrs. Surratt had the ill-luck to be tried just as the capture of Jefferson Davis was charging the emotional atmosphere further. Moreover, collusion in the plot of her son, who was still at large, also prejudiced her case.

Eleven years ago Helen Jones Campbell related the case for Mrs. Surratt with completeness but without documentation. Mr. Moore has not made the same mistake; his footnotes show great familiarity with the sources—so great, he is able to call the trial record editor, Benjamin Perley Poore, Ben.

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