Book Reviews

The Assassination of President Lincoln and the Trial of the Conspirators: The Courtroom Testimony as Originally Compiled by Benn Pitman. With an introduction by Philip Van Doren Stern. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1954, pp. xxiv, 422. Illustrations and introduction. $7.50.)

On May 9, 1865, eight persons went on trial before a military commission in Washington, charged with complicity in a plot to assassinate President Abraham Lincoln and other high personages in the government. Charges were also presented against Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States, and certain Confederate agents. A staff of court reporters, headed by Benn Pitman, took down the record of the trial. When it ended, early in July, four versions of the court proceedings were rushed into print. Two of them, published respectively by Barclay & Co. and T. B. Peterson & Brothers, both of Philadelphia, the one a mere summary and the other frequently inaccurate, scarcely merit our attention. The other two have been our chief sources of information as to what went on behind the closed doors of the courtroom.

The first of these, edited by a well-known Washington journalist, Ben: Perley Poore, and published by J. E. Tilton and Company of Boston, first in a ten-volume wrapper-bound edition and then in three volumes in hard covers, reproduces the interrogations and the replies of the witnesses in chronological order; but lack of a table of contents and an index makes it inconvenient to use. Moreover, both the wrapper-bound edition and the third volume in hard covers are now rare.

The final version, and the one we are here concerned with, has been reproduced in facsimile by the present publishers by means of a photographic process. Published originally by Moore, Wilstach & Baldwin of New York City, it is in some respects the most useful edition for students. For Benn Pitman, the editor, who was chief of the court reporters at the trial, so organized his material as to bring all the testimony concerning each of the conspirators together, and he implemented his volume with a complete table of contents and an alphabetical index of witnesses. A map of Booth's

escape route, a diagram of the stage of Ford's theater together with a map of the vicinity, and a floor plan of the courtroom are other features of his book. Besides the testimony, moreover, he also printed the orders convening the military commission, the rules for its guidance, its findings, the sentences, and the arguments of counsel, none of which are to be found in Poore's version.

Notwithstanding the superiority of Pitman's book in these respects, however, it also has defects and limitations. Both Pitman and Poore were obliged to omit some of the testimony in order to obtain permission to publish from the War Department. And Pitman omitted still more of it according to his own standards of relevancy, triviality, and repetitiousness. Furthermore, his method of organization made it necessary for him to depart from the chronology of the trial, though he always gives the date of the witnesses' testimony. And to save space, he often omits the questions and consolidates the answers of the witnesses. For the general reader and even for most students these are not serious defects, but those who must work meticulously may find it necessary to use Poore along with Pitman.

Since the publishers must expect a narrow margin of profit on a venture such as this, one should perhaps forgive them the use of a printing process, which, through reproduction of the original minuscule two-column type, endangers the reader's eyesight. And they are to be commended for adding a splendid and informative introduction by Philip Van Doren Stern.

Springfield, Illinois Benjamin P. Thomas

Charles A. Beard: An Appraisal. Edited by Howard K. Beale. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954, pp. xiv, 312. Bibliography. $4.50.)

In the nineteenth century the American public learned its history from such great scholars as John L. Motley, George Bancroft, William H. Prescott, and Francis Parkman. These men knew their subjects, and could write readable prose. In the twentieth century, however, hardly any American historians have attained a popular following. Allan Nevins, perhaps; and possibly Henry Steele Commager, Samuel Eliot