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Mrs. Surratt's Case



Was Mary E. Surratt unjustly hanged that rainy day in Washington, D. C.?

On May 10, 1865, a trial was held before a United States military commission in Washington, D. C., which has since been described by no less conservative an authority than "The Dictionary of American Biography" as "one of the most irregular trials in history." This court-martial, which was probably the most sensational in the annals of the republic, involved eight persons, one of them a woman, all accused of having conspired with Jefferson Davis, President of the recently defunct Confederacy, to assassinate Abraham Lincoln and other high officials of the United States Government.

The proceedings lasted more than a month and were strictly star-chamber, reminiscent of the case of Alfred Dreyfus in France and the Reichstag Fire Trial in Leipzig of 1934. In other words, the commission was interested solely in proving a political point and apparently scrupled at nothing to do it. Important evidence in government possession which would have been damaging to the prosecution was suppressed; the accused were not permitted to testify for themselves; witnesses were intimidated, and the defense lawyers treated with contempt for which they had no redress. The upshot, which everyone knows, was that four of the accused were sent to the gallows, while various punishments which the commission deemed fitting were meted out to the other four.

In the years since that period, when war hatred still burned and calmness of judgment was swept away in the national grief and rage over the killing of a beloved leader, it has become apparent that one of the four who were hanged was probably

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innocent. That person was Mary Elizabeth Surratt, 45-year-old widow of a Maryland county "squire" and keeper of the Washington boardinghouse in which John Wilkes Booth and company perfected their megalomaniac crime.

The life story of Mary E. Surratt is told by Helen Jones Campbell for the first time in a new book called "The Case for Mrs. Surratt." This biography, which reads like a novel and is regrettably lacking in notes or documentation of any kind, doesn't mince words. The author proceeds on the premise that her heroine was a victim of judicial murder; that she was completely innocent and that her persecutors, chief of whom was Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, were fully aware of it. The military tribunal which sentenced Mrs. Surratt later petitioned President Johnson to commute her sentence, but the Judge Advocate, acting on Stanton's orders, kept the document from Johnson until after the execution. It was reported, years later that a day before his death—which rumor claimed was a suicide—Stanton murmured to a friend: "That Surratt woman haunts me."

Mrs. Campbell makes out a strong case for her historical client. Although Mrs. Surratt was not an interesting woman, except by virtue of her terrible plight, the story of her trial and the reconstruction of an hysterical period combine to make a fascinating piece of Americana, if not one that anyone can be proud of. (THE CASE FOR MRS. SURRATT. *By Helen Jones Campbell.* 272 pages. Putnam. \$3.)

