

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Lizzie Didn't Do It*

REFERENCE: Masterton W. *Lizzie Didn't Do It*. Branden Publishing Company, Boston, MA, 2000, pp. 238.

The title of this volume is, of course, a dead give away. Lizzie Borden, accused of and tried for the gruesome "axe" murder of her mother and father, is, in fact, innocent. Even though she was legally acquitted of the two murders, there was and still is considerable speculation about her true status. This, even though the murders were committed in 1892. The still well-known quatrain, "Lizzie Borden took an axe", perhaps reveals more than anything else that this is a case—and a police investigation—that endures in the annals of crime.

In this book the author systematically dissects the Borden case as it made its way from the initial police investigation to the prosecutor and then to trial. In the 16 well-organized chapters the reader is presented with some new details of the investigation and of the "evidence." The challenge to accepted "facts" is thorough and, to me, admittedly not an aficionado of this case, fairly persuasive. The author's conclusion, revealed in his title, is largely based on a contemporary understanding of the time-of-death evidence.

According to the author, Lizzie couldn't have committed the crimes. But, then, who did? There are some likely suspects. These are revealed in the final chapter. They are not equally likely culprits but, unfortunately, there is no incriminating physical evidence to permit one to choose a particular suspect over the others. I'll leave it to others to decide if there is a more compelling case against any of these than there is against Lizzie. But, because the author does a nice job of casting doubt on the most damaging evidence marshaled against Lizzie Borden, he is to be congratulated for offering a resolution, even if not entirely satisfactory, to the mystery.

Masterton does a nice, balanced job of discussing, with a great degree of objectivity, the main evidence against Lizzie Borden including the Prussic Acid, the burning of the dress, and the "note." In the first half of the book, chapters 1 to 8, one finds details of the investigation and the trial. In the second half, the author sets forth

his "evidence" in support of his conclusion. This is done with careful attention to contemporary understanding of some of the forensic aspects of the Lizzie Borden investigation. There are ample drawings and figures that accompany the text; these add interest and provide detail to aid in understanding certain features of the presentation.

There were portions of this book which, when juxtaposed with cases in contemporary times, reveal much not just about the Borden case but also about how, in some important ways, significant progress in the police investigative process has not been made. For example, the first officer to arrive at the Borden house had the presence of mind to station someone at the door with orders to admit no one except police officers. He carried out his duties faithfully for seven hours, whereupon he asked to be relieved to have supper. Contrast this with another well-known but contemporary case, the killing of Jon Benet Ramsay. In this investigation it is well established that the first officer on the scene did not follow the protocol applied in the Borden case; the crime scene was not only not protected, it was contaminated beyond repair. This is truly an unwelcome state of affairs. More than 100 years (since the Borden case) and investigative protocol on occasion is still not satisfactory. Fortunately this is not the rule, but even so, in such instances the case is lost from the start. We will never be any more certain about them now than we will be a hundred years from now. In short, this book shows that while forensic techniques and knowledge have advanced considerably, it is not necessarily true that police investigatory procedures have kept pace. To paraphrase a current aphorism—it is the preparation, stupid! The advances in the forensic sciences mean little without the necessary training of those who may be first on the scene but last on knowing what to do when they get there. Pardon the editorial aside.

For "Lizzie" aficionados this book is a must-have for your shelf. If you are interested in police investigation and desire documentation of how far we still have to go, this volume will help. If, on the other hand, you just enjoy reading about famous cases you will appreciate the way in which the author considers the evidence in light of contemporary standards. Even if you strongly disagree with his conclusion, you will enjoy seeing how he got there.

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