

## The Literature of James Garfield's Assassination

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## Abstract

The 1881 assassination of James Garfield by Charles Guiteau has been studied very little since the event took place. Many books were written immediately following the event in 1881 and 1882, while only four additional works have been produced between 1968 and 2016. Early works written by Garfield's contemporaries have led to the acceptance of four major misperceptions regarding the event's significance and origins. Contemporary writers focusing on the assassination have worked to reanalyze the ramifications of Garfield's death, create a fuller picture of who James Garfield and Charles Guiteau were, find better explanations for who was really to blame for Garfield's death, and explain why this subject has gained barely any attention. The literature on this topic remains very sparse, revealing a greater need for professional historians to explore further areas of study, such as the impact that the assassination had on the American people and how Americans' reactions to tragedy have changed over time as additional assassinations have taken place.

*I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work. I acknowledge that the UMW Writing Center aided me in editing this work.*

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The assassination of President James Garfield in 1881 was a horribly tragic and immensely important event in American history that impacted the United States' political system from then on. Yet little attention has been paid to Garfield's untimely death despite its long-reaching ramifications. James Garfield had been in office for only two hundred days when Charles Guiteau shot the president on July 2, 1881. Guiteau, a victim of severe mental illness, believed he helped get Garfield elected by passing out pamphlets and thus deserved a job in his administration. He decided to kill the president after being turned away. Garfield survived the shooting and was taken under the care of Dr. Willard Bliss. Bliss repeatedly probed for the bullet with dirty equipment, forbade inventor Alexander Graham Bell from using his metal detector to find the bullet, and used Garfield's condition as an opportunity to test his theory on rectal feeding. What resulted was a major infection that eventually took Garfield's life on September 19, 1881. Little regard was taken for Charles Guiteau's illness and he was executed in 1882. Garfield's assassination raised concerns about the use of the spoils system and led to a major piece of civil service reform legislation, the 1883 Pendleton Act.<sup>1</sup>

In the year following Garfield's death Americans wrote extensively about the assassination. Citizens of various backgrounds, including poets, ministers, legislators, and editors, published books on the assassination during this time. Yet the study stopped in 1883 and did not resume for over eight decades. Between 1968 and 2016, only four monographs have been published that focus specifically on the assassination. The defining feature of the literature is the general lack of work on the subject. Early works by Garfield's contemporaries led Americans to greatly misunderstand the assassination. Since the reemergence of the study in 1968, writers

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<sup>1</sup> The spoils system was used after an election to give civil service jobs to those who supported a winning political party. Garfield was a supporter of doing away with partisan tactics like this system. In 1883, the Pendleton Act was passed due to concerns about the use of this system and created a better system for hiring federal employees based on qualifications instead of party loyalty.

have been driven by the need to correct these misperceptions created by nineteenth-century writers regarding the event's causes and significance. The literature addresses four key questions: how should Garfield and Guiteau be remembered, why has the assassination been largely overlooked, who is to blame, and what impact has it had? Despite the little work that has been done, twentieth and twenty-first century writers have managed to provide a more thorough, diverse explanation of the event that corrects the biases of nineteenth-century writers. With greater distance, modern writers have come to agree that others besides Guiteau may have been to blame for Garfield's death, but they still largely disagree on why the assassination is important today.

Eight monographs were published between 1881 and 1882, all of which provide the same general story of the assassination.<sup>2</sup> Nineteenth-century writers worked with the information on mental illness and medicine that they had available to them. There was no clear legal precedent for cases involving mentally-ill defendants nor a clear understanding of mental illness in general. Phrenology was used to explain Guiteau's behavior, which demonstrates how limited the

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<sup>2</sup> Ralston Balch, *The Life of James Abram Garfield: Late President of the United States* (Philadelphia: J.C. McCurdy & Co., 1881; HathiTrust), accessed March 2019, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hx2q82>; Emma Elizabeth Brown, *The Life and Public Services of James A. Garfield, Twentieth President of the United States* (Boston: D. Lothrop & Co., 1881; HathiTrust), accessed April 2019, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3288387>; Russell H. Conwell, *The Life, Speeches, and Public Services of James A. Garfield, Twentieth President of the United States* (Portland: George Stinson & Co., 1881; HathiTrust), accessed March 2019, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/osu.32435016125718>; James Dabney McCabe, *Our Martyred President: The Life and Public Services of Gen. James A. Garfield, Together with the History of His Assassination* (Cleveland: N.G. Hamilton, 1881; HathiTrust), accessed March 2019, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hx2q7m>; J.S. Ogilvie, *History of the Attempted Assassination of James A. Garfield* (New York: J.S. Ogilvie & Co., 1881; HathiTrust), accessed March 2019, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951002086073>; John Clark Ridpath, *The Life and Trial of Guiteau the Assassin* (Cincinnati: Jones Brothers & Co., 1881; HathiTrust), accessed April 2019, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.319510020261241>; John Clark Ridpath, *The Life and Work of James A. Garfield* (Cincinnati: Jones Brothers & Co., 1881; HathiTrust), accessed April 2019, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015027046708>; William Makepeace Thayer, *From Log-Cabin to White House: Life of James A. Garfield; Boyhood, Youth, Manhood, Assassination, Death, Funeral* (Boston: James H. Earle Publisher, 1881; HathiTrust), accessed April 2019, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433082405873>.

understandings of mental illness were at the time of Guiteau's trial.<sup>3</sup> Also, the germ theory had not yet been accepted as a common practice, leaving these writers no reason to doubt the decisions made by Dr. Bliss.<sup>4</sup> Works such as reformer and writer James Dabney McCabe's 1881 book, *Our Martyred President: The Life and Public Service of Gen. James A. Garfield, Together with the History of His Assassination* never criticized the questionable methods used by Garfield's doctors and instead cast all anger towards Guiteau.<sup>5</sup> These writers lacked the necessary distance to understand the event's significance and the necessary objectivity to warrant a fair depiction of Garfield or Guiteau. Instead, this body of work provides nothing more than a repetitive, dramatic description of the assassination. Until the 1960s, anyone hoping to study the event was left to depend on these limited, heavily biased sources.

The first major misperception that the literature has responded to in modern times is over who James Garfield and Charles Guiteau really were. Nineteenth-century works such as publisher J.S. Ogilvie's 1881 book, *History of the Attempted Assassination of James A. Garfield* lionized Garfield as a self-made, virtuous man who had been struck down in his prime, while Guiteau was vilified and reduced to nothing more than an angry job-seeker despite his state of mental illness.<sup>6</sup> After over eight decades, the polarizing images of Garfield and Guiteau left behind were finally questioned by medical historian Charles E. Rosenberg in his 1968 book, *The*

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<sup>3</sup> Phrenology was the study of the skull's size and shape and was used to explain behavior, character, and intelligence. It was used extensively during the 19<sup>th</sup> century but has since then been disproven and is considered highly outdated today.

<sup>4</sup> This scientific theory proves the existence of microorganisms that cause diseases and illnesses. While it was developed prior to the nineteenth century, most had not adopted it until the end of the century.

<sup>5</sup> McCabe, *Our Martyred President*.

<sup>6</sup> Ogilvie, *History of the Attempted Assassination*.

*Trial of the Assassin Guiteau: Psychiatry and Law in the Gilded Age.*<sup>7</sup> Unlike his antecedents, who spent most of their books praising Garfield, Rosenberg turned attention toward Guiteau. Rosenberg's study prompted a much-needed reanalysis of Garfield's assassin, proving that the legal methods used during Guiteau's trial were unfair and that history has treated him rather unkindly.

Attorney and political writer Kenneth Ackerman also took issue with the way that these two figures have been remembered in connection to the assassination. In his 2003 book, *Dark Horse: The Surprise Election and Political Murder of President James A. Garfield*, Ackerman criticizes Garfield's contemporaries for using him as a martyr for reform by tying his death to political corruption, even though Garfield himself was a strong supporter of ridding the White House of patronage.<sup>8</sup> The field of history has long regarded the assassination as proof of the political corruption that came to define the Gilded Age, yet these works argue that political corruption was not something Charles Guiteau or James Garfield engaged in. The literature has worked to give Americans a more realistic, fair portrayal of these two figures and thus a better understanding of why the assassination happened in the first place.

A second issue that modern authors have addressed is why the subject has been of so little focus. After Garfield's death, the entire nation came together to mourn and worked to keep the memory of his assassination alive by writing about it, but by the turn of the twentieth century the nation was faced with other catastrophes. President William McKinley was assassinated in 1901, the Titanic sank in 1911, and the First World War broke out in 1914. Americans were

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<sup>7</sup> Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Trial of the Assassin Guiteau: Psychiatry and Law in the Gilded Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth D. Ackerman, *Dark Horse: The Surprise Election and Political Murder of President James A. Garfield* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003).

becoming well-acquainted with frequent tragedy and Garfield's assassination soon disappeared from focus. Even with other assassinations during the 1960s that might have encouraged additional research on the subject, focus has never remained on the Garfield assassination for long.

In his book, Ackerman argues that the busy nature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have made the assassination seem irrelevant in Americans' minds. He relies mostly on government records, personal letters, and 1880s newspapers to tell the story of the assassination from a political perspective, adding relevance by connecting the event to modern issues. Similarly, Rosenberg states that nothing has been written about Garfield's assassination to differentiate him from "the other stout, imposing, and reassuringly bearded postbellum presidents."<sup>9</sup> By tackling the subject from a legal and medical perspective, relying heavily on court records, letters, diaries, and medical records, he has also worked to breathe new life into the subject and diversify the literature instead of presenting the same narrative repeated since the 1880s.

Writers have also reexamined who was to blame for Garfield's assassination and, by the 2000s, have come to agree that Charles Guiteau was not solely to blame. Journalist and popular history writer Candice Millard's 2011 book, *Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine, and the Murder of a President* stands as the most thorough, insightful work on the subject, of which there are few to turn to.<sup>10</sup> Employing both a political and medical perspective, brought first by Rosenberg and Ackerman to the field, Millard ties together essential pieces of evidence that had not been examined before. She relies on letters, diary entries, medical records,

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<sup>9</sup> Rosenberg, *The Trial of the Assassin Guiteau*, ix.

<sup>10</sup> Candice Millard, *Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine, and the Murder of a President* (New York: Doubleday, 2011).

Garfield's autopsy report, court proceedings, nineteenth-century newspapers and pamphlets, interviews with authors like Kenneth Ackerman, and 1880s monographs to tell the story of the assassination. Millard includes Dr. Willard Bliss as a major part of the discussion for the first time. She reinforces Ackerman's ideas about Garfield's commitment to fighting the use of patronage and argues that Bliss's negligence cost Garfield his life—not a corrupt administration. While President Garfield would never have been in such a position had Guiteau not acted, Bliss's pride kept Garfield from getting the best care available.

Journalist and crime writer Fred Rosen also blames Dr. Bliss for Garfield's death in his 2016 book, *Murdering the President: Alexander Graham Bell and the Race to Save James Garfield*.<sup>11</sup> Yet his book has little to add to the subject and uses a limited number of scholarly sources to support his claims. Rosen relies heavily on websites and online blogs as source material to tell a story of the assassination that is focused more on entertainment value than historical fact. Nonetheless, Rosen's book proves that modern understandings of the assassination are changing; the literature has moved from a highly critical assault on Guiteau's character to a more balanced analysis that considers other explanations besides those left behind by 1880s writers. Distance and advancements in our understandings of mental illness and medicine, namely microbiology, have given modern writers like Millard an advantage that Garfield's contemporaries did not have; they have allowed modern writers an opportunity to fully understand the role of Garfield's doctors and Guiteau's psychiatrists.

While writers have come to agree that forces and figures besides political corruption and Charles Guiteau allowed the assassination to happen and Garfield's health to fail, there is a lack

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<sup>11</sup> Fred Rosen, *Murdering the President: Alexander Graham Bell and the Race to Save James Garfield* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2016), ProQuest E-book Central, accessed March 2019, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umw/detail.action?docID=4602530>.



of consensus on the overall impact of the assassination. Within his book, Rosenberg stresses the importance of the assassination to advancements in the fields of medicine, psychiatry, and law, while Ackerman instead argues that even though Guiteau has been dismissed as an office-seeker, he brought about a vital piece of reform legislation that still positively impacts our government today. Yet Millard takes issue with the idea that the assassination has been tied to the Pendleton Act in the first place, not seeing Garfield's death as brought on because of the state of corruption that existed at that time. She credits the assassination with helping to heal wounds between the North and South in a way that Abraham Lincoln's 1865 assassination had not; Americans united to mourn on a massive scale and were bettered because of it. Nonetheless, the literature has offered additional explanations for how the event has impacted the United States beyond the outcomes stressed by 1880s writers.

The body of works that define the study of the assassination, published from 1968 to 2016, was built by two journalists, an attorney, and a medical historian. As a popular writer who focuses primarily on killers, juicy murders, and crime, Rosen was likely driven to the subject due to its potential for entertainment value because Garfield's assassination offers fresh, interesting material. Most of these authors are not professional historians and large spans of time break up the work that has been done since the assassination took place. While these works have no doubt created a credible body of work based on extensive research, professional historians themselves should pay closer attention to James Garfield and other figures from his era because of the general ambivalence that Americans have towards the subject. This ambivalence is demonstrated by the commonly-held misperceptions that have continued since the 19<sup>th</sup> century despite the efforts of writers like Ackerman, Rosenberg, and Millard.

While political, medical, and legal perspectives have been applied to the study, many aspects of the assassination have never been explored. What has yet to be written is a cultural study of the assassination's impact on the American people during the 1880s. Historians could further explore how the American people responded to this tragedy and how the nation's reaction to assassination has changed over time, as we have unfortunately been made to accept its constant possibility. Comparisons could be made between Garfield's assassination and the assassinations of presidents Abraham Lincoln, William McKinley, and John F. Kennedy that would provide further insight on how assassinated presidents have been remembered differently depending on the political climate in which assassinations have taken place. Why has Garfield largely been forgotten, while others have gained additional attention because of the nature of their deaths? While most Americans may consider this field of study unimportant, further avenues remain that could deepen understandings about the Gilded Age, political assassinations, and changing responses to tragic events.

Despite the scarcity of works that exist on James Garfield's assassination, many important changes have emerged over time. The literature has provided a more complete look at both Guiteau and Garfield than the descriptions left behind by their contemporaries. Garfield was not like many of the Gilded Age politicians he is often grouped with, such as New York party boss Roscoe Conkling, known best for his use of corrupt political practices.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Charles Guiteau was driven not by anger but by illness; he was a greatly misunderstood victim of the times in which he lived. Doctor Bliss has also been worked into the narrative when assigning blame for Garfield's death, as his prideful, negligent behavior made it impossible for Garfield to

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<sup>12</sup> Roscoe Conkling was a Congressman from New York and a Stalwart party boss in the New York Customs House. Conkling was known for his use of party patronage in the Customs House to give political jobs to friends and supporters. Conkling and Garfield had an ongoing conflict because of this.

recover. These sources have also corrected understandings regarding the impact of Garfield's death on our nation's history. Lastly, the literature has revealed shortcomings in common understandings of the Gilded Age and an overall lack of study on how our nation handles tragedy and chooses to remember those lost to assassination.

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The bugger of Garfield's assassination is that Guiteau was no better at killing presidents than he was at electing them. Despite his exultation "Arthur is President now!", he actually inflicted what could have been a non-fatal flesh wound that through ten-thumbed medical intervention became an agonizing eighty-day Calvary for the miserable Garfield. Garfield's flatulence became intolerable, according to one biographer that "basically starved him to death." He lost 100 pounds before succumbing; the autopsy concluded that Garfield probably would have lived if not for the medical attention, which didn't stop the doctors from submitting a sizable invoice to the feds for services rendered. The assassination of James A. Garfield led to the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act in 1883. President James Garfield was considered the martyr for civil war reform. What event made Chester Arthur president? The assassination of James Garfield. Did the assassination of McKinley bring about an end to the Spoils System? The assassination occurred less than four months into Garfield's term as the 20th president of the United States in 1881. What law was passed due to assassination of President James Garfield? The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883. What acts were passed as a result of the assassination of President James Garfield? Unveiling Of President Garfield Assassination Waysides On National Mall. The National Park Service will be unveiling two temporary waysides interpreting the 1881 assassination of President James A. Garfield on Monday, November 19, at 10:30 a.m. on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Put a marker on the site of James Garfield's Assassination. September 1, 2015. We can do it too! It has been about four years since researchers finally identified the precise spot on the Dallas Love Field tarmac where U.S. District Judge Sarah T. Hughes administered the oath of office. Put a marker on the site of James Garfield's Assassination. August 25, 2015. Fascinating interview. Also at the end of it, he mentions that he too is trying to get a marker put at the site of the Garfield Assassination.