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Legacy Of Violence: Lynch Mobs And Executions In Minnesota

John D. Bessler Bessler

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Minnesota is one of only twelve states that does not allow the death penalty, but that was not always the case. In fact, until 1911 executions in the state were legal and frequently carried out. In Legacy of Violence, John D. Bessler takes us on a compelling journey through the history of lynchings and state-sanctioned executions that dramatically shaped Minnesota's past.Through personal accounts of those involved with the events, Bessler traces the history of both famous and lesser-known executions and lynchings in Minnesota, the state's anti–death penalty and anti-lynching movements, and the role of the media in the death penalty debate. Bessler reveals Abraham Lincoln's thoughts as he ordered the largest mass execution in U.S. history of thirty-eight Indians in Mankato after the Dakota Conflict of 1862. He recounts the events surrounding the death of Ann Bilansky, the only woman ever executed in Minnesota, and the infamous botched hanging of William Williams, which led to renewed calls for the abolition of capital punishment. He tells the story of the 1920 lynching in Duluth of three African-American circus workers—wrongfully accused of rape—and the anti-lynching crusade that followed. The significant role that Minnesota played in America's transformation to private, after-dark executions is presented in the discussion of the "midnight assassination law." Bessler's account is made more timely by thirty-five hundred people on death row in America today—more than at any other time in our nation's history. Is Minnesota's current approach superior to that of states that have capital punishment? Bessler looks at Minnesota history to ask whether the application of the death penalty can truly solve the problem of violence in America.John D. Bessler is an attorney at the Minneapolis law firm of Kelly & Berens and an adjunct professor at the University of Minnesota Law School. He is the author of Kiss of Death: America's Love Affair with the Death Penalty (2003) and Death in the Dark: Midnight Executions in America (1997).

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