

# H-Net Reviews

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Michael Burlingame, ed. *An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay's Interviews and Essays*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006. Reprint of 1996 edition. Notes. index. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8093-2684-6.

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## Nicolay's Informants

John G. Nicolay, who served as Lincoln's personal secretary during the Civil War, has always been overshadowed by the brilliant, handsome, and accomplished John Hay. During the Gilded Age, while Hay blossomed into a respected writer and political figure (husband to a railroad magnate's daughter, friend to Henry Adams and other luminaries, Secretary of State overseeing a budding empire), Nicolay faded into oblivion, known only, if at all, as the foremost keeper of the sacred flame of Lincoln's memory.

This was an odd trajectory for Nicolay, a man who, after all, co-wrote a monumental biography of Lincoln and did most of the arduous work involved in publishing the first large collection of Lincoln's writings. One would think that such services would have earned him a lasting place in the hall of Lincolnia. When first published, Nicolay's *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (1886), written with Hay, was well received; but many since have found it to be partisan and pedestrian. As Michael Burlingame notes in the introduction to this volume, Nicolay and Hay distrusted recollections (even their own) and so relied almost wholly on documents and other sources now widely available. Their edition of Lincoln's *Complete Works*, published in twelve volumes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, turned out to be far from complete, and has long since been superseded by Roy Prentice Basler's *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (1953) (itself soon to be displaced by a massive new edition of Lincoln's papers). And so Nicolay, despite his presence at the center of events during America's most tragic and glorious years, receded in importance for those seeking to understand Lincoln and the Civil War.

But Nicolay's story has a happy ending, thanks in part to this important and expertly presented collection of Nicolay's unpublished research and notes. Michael Burlingame, Sadowski Professor of History Emeritus at Connecticut College and author of the highly regarded

*The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (1994), has revealed a Nicolay who can now take his rightful role among the precious few important and recognized sources for the life of Lincoln. Nicolay, it turns out, collected a large mass of material about Lincoln from those who knew him best, gathered through interviews and letters across several decades. A great deal of this material, much of it written in Nicolay's idiosyncratic shorthand, never made it into print, and so has lain dormant among his papers, a trove of Lincolnia that Burlingame has rescued from oblivion, at the same time rescuing, in a certain way, Nicolay as well.

This volume, reprinted now ten years after its initial publication, is part of a larger project of publications, in which Burlingame has almost single-handedly given us some of the most important additions to our store of primary sources and documents about Lincoln, since Lincoln's own papers first became publicly available in 1948. At present, Burlingame, working often with the Abraham Lincoln Association and Southern Illinois University Press, has published almost a dozen volumes of expertly edited diaries, letters, unpublished interviews, and newspaper articles from Nicolay, Hay, and others close to Lincoln. As the first of these endeavors, *An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln* (1996) was a very strong beginning, though it does not, perhaps, quite reach the standard set by Burlingame's edition of John Hay's diary (co-edited with John R. Turner Ettliger), which presents end-notes of such comprehensiveness that they constitute, in themselves, almost an entire history of life in Washington during the Civil War. Since the publication of the *Collected Works*, only *Herndon's Informants* (1997) (edited by Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis with the assistance of Terry Wilson) can rival Burlingame's books as contributions to Lincolnia.

Burlingame's brief introduction in the present volume begins with a rapid overview of Nicolay's life and

his relationship to Lincoln. As a journalist and assistant to the Illinois Secretary of State in the late 1850s, Nicolay had many opportunities to talk politics and play chess with the rising star of Illinois politics. After his election as president, Lincoln hired Nicolay to help with his correspondence and found him so useful that Nicolay was one of the few people from Springfield that Lincoln brought with him to Washington. (Hay was another.) To the outside world, Nicolay's primary role in the White House was "the bull-dog of the ante-room," in the words of one contemporary source, protecting the president from intrusive well-wishers and demanding office-seekers (p. xiii). According to contemporaries, in these duties Nicolay was either ill-humored and disagreeable or reticent and civil, but Burlingame does not seek to resolve these contradictory descriptions or delve into Nicolay's important role in Lincoln's White House. Burlingame does not mention, for example, that Lincoln gave Nicolay several sensitive assignments, including keeping an eye on the potentially explosive Baltimore convention of 1864 that re-nominated Lincoln for President. Burlingame's introduction then moves on to describe the provenance of Nicolay's interviews, notes, and research presented in the volume. From the first, Nicolay and Hay were planning a history of the administration, but most of the material presented here was collected during interviews Nico-

lay conducted in 1870s and 1880s. A more complete description of the papers overall might be wished for, but Burlingame does list for every document the repository where it was consulted, for the most part either the Library of Congress or the John Hay Library at Brown University. Each entry also benefits from Burlingame's indefatigable research, with notes detailing the background of the person interviewed, the important controversies raised, and the context of the time when the interview took place. The material is arranged in two sections, the first presenting interviews that Nicolay conducted in Springfield, the second giving the interviews that took place in Washington, D. C. For the most part, this division corresponds to the main topic of the interview in question, either Lincoln's life before the presidency, or his time in office, so this organization makes a good deal of sense. A fine index allows one to follow the thread of topics that, understandably in oral interviews, disappear and reappear in the course of these conversations across the years. Nicolay's interviews and the other materials here fully live up to Burlingame's description as "high-grade ore for the historian's smelter" (p. xvii), revealing Lincoln as Nicolay's informants saw him, but also restoring Nicolay as a central figure for our understanding of the sixteenth president.

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