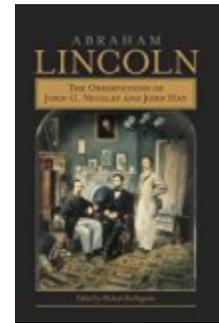


Michael Burlingame, ed. *Abraham Lincoln: The Observations of John G. Nicolay and John Hay*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007. x + 190 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2738-6.

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Published on H-CivWar (June, 2007)



Separating the Lincoln from the Chaff: The Value of Perspective

No figure in American history—and few, if any, in history overall—have been written about and analyzed more than Abraham Lincoln. His lionization began as early as the hours after his assassination in 1865. One of the earliest monographs on the president, his life, and the war which came to define his term in office, was the ten-volume *Abraham Lincoln: A History* written by Lincoln’s White House secretaries John G. Nicolay and John Hay in 1886. Heavily criticized at the time of its initial publication, the work was as much a political biography of the war years as of Lincoln himself. In *Abraham Lincoln: The Observations of John G. Nicolay and John Hay*, noted historian Michael Burlingame has waded through the volumes of commentary and tangential histories to present future students of the Civil War era with a more concise portrait of the president through the eyes of those who were closest to him.

As the Sadowski Professor of History Emeritus at Connecticut College and previous winner of the Lincoln Prize, Michael Burlingame has dedicated a great deal of time and research into these, and other, primary sources of the Lincoln Administration. In this monograph, he utilizes those volumes concerned with the president’s first two years in office, from his election in 1860 through the final firing of Gen. George McClellan in late 1862. Prior to the text proper, however, is an introduction that is “a slightly altered form” of an essay on the Nicolay-Hay biography which the editor wrote nearly ten years ago (p. x). That introduction provides an objective, even-handed account of the original history written by Nicolay and

Hay. Here, Burlingame points out the myriad problems with the original work, aside from its massive length. Among these are primarily blatant slants to the historical account, one that both lionizes Lincoln and appeases Lincoln’s son Robert, who was important to the men’s access to the president’s papers.

Burlingame points out many criticisms made at the time that the original *History* was written, and that remain problematic for any who wish to navigate the work as a whole: a clear pro-Republican/anti-South agenda; the refusal by the original authors to see their subject for his flaws as well as his strengths; and, numerous and lengthy tangents from the titled subject. From Burlingame’s account, it would appear that what Nicolay and Hay actually produced was more a political history of the Civil War period rather than a simple biography of one man. Despite these flaws, however, Burlingame mentions that there were many contemporaries who applauded the original work, and that—prior to the official release of the president’s papers many decades after his death—the original Nicolay/Hay work was a vitally important source for Lincoln/Civil War scholars.

Within the text itself, Burlingame shifts the original work to its proper place in history: as a primary source of first-hand observations. Along with quotes and excerpts from Nicolay and Hay’s *History*, Burlingame inserts a myriad of sources ranging from newspaper accounts to other journal, diary, and letter accounts. Utilizing Nicolay and Hay in this way, and therefore showing

the reader that obvious biases are inherent in those observations, proper historical analysis can be implemented on the notes, diaries, journals, and letters of these two eyewitnesses to one of American history's defining periods. From the first chapter, the insights of Nicolay and Hay provide a familiar portrait of Lincoln: one of a gracious winner, intent on securing party cohesion through cabinet appointments as early as election night itself, while shortly thereafter finding the patronage of Washington politics distasteful. Burlingame's style in weaving together the observations of these two men never distracts from the flow of the narrative.

Along with the aforementioned observations, Burlingame has also provided detailed accounts from these men on their observations of the events that led to war: secession, Fort Sumter, the amassing of the Army of the Potomac, and a scathing account of the generalship of George B. McClellan. Throughout these events, Lincoln rises above the fray as the voice of wisdom and leadership, while detractors such as McClellan are treated as little more than political and mental inferiors. It does not take long into the text to see the clear bias of Nicolay and Hay. Luckily for the reader, these biases are subdued somewhat by the expert editing of Burlingame with additional primary and secondary analyses of events. Burlingame, in fact, ends most chapters with a lengthy excerpt from the original Nicolay/Hay *History*. These excerpts, preceded as they are by other sources, lend credence to the observations of these men that their flowery

epoch on its own may have lost. As such, the original work regains importance in historical analysis.

The only major criticism that one could make of the overall work is its brevity. With the exception of a concluding chapter on the post-assassination "fame" of the president, the book itself really ends in December of 1862, hardly a high point in the Lincoln administration. By the time the reader has reached the end, wading through both primary and secondary accounts of the president's first two years in office, the ride abruptly stops. What the work most desperately needs is completion. If a second volume is not forthcoming, then this volume should have seen its topic through to its logical conclusion. If a second volume is planned, readers should be promised as much. Even within the pages of this monograph, room for expansion and/or additional topics is clear.

That said, *Abraham Lincoln: The Observations of John G. Nicolay and John Hay* should be marked as a valuable addition to Lincoln studies. The original 1886 work may have long since been disregarded for its overt biases. Yet the author has substantiated the original work—and, on occasion, provided alternate interpretations—using additional primary sources and more recent secondary analyses. Burlingame's masterly editing has transformed the original "history" written by Nicolay and Hay to the more appropriate status of a primary document—alongside the very letters, journals, diaries, and memos from which the original history was conceived.

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Citation: Richard Hall. Review of Burlingame, Michael, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: The Observations of John G. Nicolay and John Hay*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

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