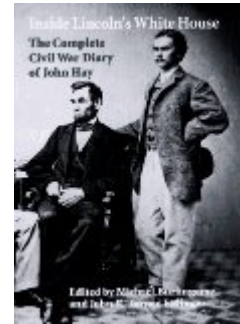


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Burlingame, John R. Turner Ettliger, eds. *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997. xx + 393 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2099-8.

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Long recognized as an invaluable primary source on Abraham Lincoln's presidency, John Hay's Civil War diaries have now been published for the third time and in their definitive form. Following the death of Lincoln's private secretary in 1905, his widow edited a privately printed edition of Hay's letters of a lifetime (selected by Henry Adams) and extracts from the diaries. Sensitive materials were edited out, and individuals were referred to only by their initials. In 1939, Tyler Dennett produced a new edition of the wartime letters and diaries. His interest in Hay related to the latter's activities as secretary of state, and he made errors identifying some of the minor characters of the Civil War era as well as in transcribing the diary accurately. Indeed, he reproduced only 90 percent of the text. Although reviews of Dennett's work pointed out its flaws, it was reprinted in 1972. Meanwhile, John R. Turner Ettliger, a special collections librarian at Brown University, where the original diaries were housed, transcribed the diaries afresh while attempting to restore the passages cancelled out by previous editors. Intending to create a definitive edition, he began extensive research to identify individuals, places, and events referred to in the text. The project, however, faltered when Ettliger left Brown. When Michael Burlingame (Connecticut College) discovered Ettliger's work a few years ago, he approached him about completing the edition. The result is the complete text of the diaries with the exception of an occasional word or a few lines that could not be deciphered. Previously deleted passages are indicated; indeed, every effort has been made to be faithful to the original text. The notes are almost half the length of the diary text and infinitely more complete and helpful than Dennett's notes. Where ambiguity exists in identifying individuals mentioned in

a passage, the editors indicate the possibilities for the reader.

Hay was in his early twenties when hired to assist John Nicolay in answering the avalanche of letters Lincoln received in the aftermath of his presidential nomination. The son of an Illinois doctor and a graduate of Brown, Hay was bright, self-confident, and untested by adversity. He impressed others as being alternatively discreetly charming and well mannered and a bit arrogant. He had the trust of the president, who gave him confidential assignments, such as overseeing Horace Greeley's meeting with Confederate representatives at Niagara Falls in 1864 and introducing Lincoln's reconstruction plans in Florida. Yet the Tycoon (Hay's nickname for the president) also kept secrets from his secretary, who was dumbfounded by Lincoln's decision to accept Salmon P. Chase's resignation in 1864.

Putting his secretarial duties first, Hay often neglected his diary, especially at the outset. Beginning his first entry on April 18, 1861, he had lapsed in his writing by mid May, thus missing the buildup to the first battle of Bull Run in July. There are further entries in the fall of 1861, but all of 1862 is contained on seven pages of text. The first entry for 1863 comes in April; there are none for 1865. The fullest coverage is in 1864, when Hay was consumed by Lincoln's quest for reelection. In previous editions letters compensated for periods when the diaries were silent. Those reading the diaries as a story of the war will be most frustrated by the lack of narrative flow. In addition, Hay recorded trips outside Washington in small pocket diaries in note form. Entries are often intriguing but incomplete. For example, one finds on May 1, 1863, when on the Sea Islands off South Carolina, the

following entry: "The 3rd S.C. negro girls by the spring. The negro cabin and the indignant fisherman. Magnolia. Mimosa. Pride of India" (p. 52).

Yet Hay was a sensitive observer for the periods when he did write. When away from Washington, he noted natural beauty and wildlife as well as his human companions and their activities. In Washington, the political process intrigued him most, and his entries reflect what he thought were key events revealing Lincoln's character, leadership, and influences upon him. Even with this emphasis, however, the ambience of the wartime capital with drunks and prostitutes, petulant office seekers and

middling actors, like John Wilkes Booth, comes through. While it is doubtful the newly recovered passages will fundamentally alter the way either Hay or Lincoln is seen, they add to the overall authenticity of the diaries for researchers, and they remind casual readers that the historical record is full of emendations, corrections, long pauses, and second thoughts.

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