

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



jr. Gates, Henry Louis, Donald Yacovone. *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. 416 S. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-14234-0.

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Hardeman on Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln is the most analyzed and written about human being in the history of the United States. In the last two years, more than a dozen works have appeared investigating his actions, attitudes, and speeches. Only a very brave or very foolish person, therefore, would attempt another volume on “Old Abe.” Fortunately, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and his coeditor, Donald Yacovone, are the former rather than the latter, and their book, *Lincoln on Race and Slavery* will be an honored addition to libraries of historians and general readers alike.

Lincoln on Race and Slavery begins with a fifty-page introduction written by Gates. This is followed by seventy documents in chronological order (some excerpted and some not), together with an extensive headnote placing each document within its context. The book ends with a seven-page appendix entitled “Lincoln, Race and Humor” and a fourteen-page index.

In his introduction, Gates explores the evolution of Lincoln’s ideas on slavery, race, and colonization. Lincoln saw the first of these as the simplest to solve. He opposed slavery both privately and publicly from the 1830s on. But, trained in the law and devoted to a nationalist interpretation of the Constitution, his actions were limited by both. Because slavery was wrong, the solution was to isolate the institution where it existed and resist its expansion elsewhere. Thus, isolated and restrained, Lincoln believed slavery would wither and die, fulfilling the hopes of the founders.

Yet the disappearance of slavery would not solve the problem of race. As a man of his time, Lincoln viewed black people as inferior. At the same time, he believed that they were embraced by the Declaration of Independence. They, too, were endowed by their Creator with

certain inalienable rights. But balancing the first belief with the second was a conundrum. For his intellectual and political mentor, Henry Clay, the answer was the American Colonization Society.

The society, founded in 1816, encouraged the return of free Negroes and manumitted slaves to the homeland of their African ancestors. Funds for such a purpose would be provided by private philanthropy together with appropriations by the states and the federal governments. Lincoln adopted colonization as his own and promoted it as late as 1862. But the Civil War and the conduct of African Americans in the Union army ultimately modified his views on colonization as well as those on race and the Constitution’s ability to confront the wrong of slavery. Even at the end, however, Gates suggests that Lincoln, “who loved the concept of country so much more than any single component of it,” may have retained some skepticism about the ability of the white majority to accept nearly four million newly freed slaves, the capacity of most members of the black race to exercise the responsibilities of American citizenship, and even perhaps a lingering fondness for colonization (p. lix).

The primary objection to *Lincoln on Race and Slavery* is obvious. If statements are taken out of context or if certain documents are included or excluded, a distorted picture may emerge. An old but useful bromide goes, “Even the Devil can quote Scripture.” But Gates and Yacovone appear to have neither horns nor tails or an axe to grind. The portrait they present is one of a man in conflict in the middle of an age of conflict. Their Lincoln is great, but he is great despite his blemishes, blind spots, and warts. He is great because he grew in his views of liberty, justice, and citizenship. One can ask no more than this of a hero—or of a man.

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