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Orville Vernon Burton. *The Age of Lincoln.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2007. Illustrations. 420 pp. $27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-9513-1.

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A Synthesis for Everyone

For years, historians longed for a synthesis that would bring together the past three decades of new scholarship on the nineteenth century. Much of this work was among the most innovative in the discipline, using new methods and theoretical approaches that included gender and ritual studies. In the process, our understanding of this period was redefined as it incorporated new topics and dramatically changed our view of old ones. In just the past few years, we have been treated to two new syntheses of the antebellum period: Sean Wilentz's *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (2007), and Daniel Walker Howe's *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (2007).

Orville Vernon Burton's *The Age of Lincoln* is the third major synthesis of this period. Unlike Howe and Wilentz, however, Burton carries his story through to the end of the century, finishing with William Jennings Bryan and the Populists. Burton's book will be the most accessible of these three for students and nonspecialists, written in the broadest strokes and without footnotes. These features undoubtedly will frustrate some specialists, although specific notes are available online. *The Age of Lincoln* will be ideal as a foundation text for undergraduate courses and graduate seminars on the nineteenth century; scholars of the period can engage it on a different level, which is a measure of the book's sophistication. These qualities and the range of the book's audience reflect Burton's own career, too, as both a nationally recognized scholar and teacher. The book's accompanying Web site (www.theageoflincoln.com) offers a wealth of resources in the extensive notes and bibliographical essays. The notes include links to specific documents and Web sites rich in primary sources; the "Resources" section contains an extensive bibliography as well as scanned primary documents–both in original form and transcribed–that will be valuable in the classroom when used in conjunction with the book. Overall, the book and Web site together are a model of how a scholarly synthesis/monograph can be adapted to reach a wider audience and have a greater impact both in and out of the classroom. Both the author and publisher, Hill and Wang, deserve credit for their creativity.

The organizing theme of *The Age of Lincoln* is the desire for liberty and equality of opportunity that, Burton argues, defined the nineteenth century. "With the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln proclaimed the hopeful determination of the human spirit. That determination is, ultimately, the theme of this book ... this determination for freedom and the numerous contests it would inspire would become the legacy of the Age of Lincoln" (p. 3). He argues that American democracy became "fused with a millennial impulse," fostering a general commitment to perfectability that encompassed politics and justice (p. 4). Lincoln ultimately came to believe that the war provided the context and circumstances that allowed Americans to redefine freedom and equality, and extend it beyond what the Founders were prepared to do. Not surprisingly in a book of this length and which covers so much ground, the narrative seems occasionally to lose the central thesis, but Burton is remarkably consistent in bringing us back to it. And of course there will be disagreements aplenty–both large and small–from scholars of the nineteenth century, given the book's scope and the number of historical debates it engages.

Burton's general argument will be received skeptically by some, to be sure, who prefer to emphasize the limits of democratic reform in the nineteenth century. Critics may perceive it as overly "optimistic" and flattering to its central figure. Burton hardly ignores the era's contradictory legacy, although the less progressive aspects of millennial democracy surely receive less attention–the Know-Nothings, for instance, are covered in one page. The complexity of these issues is part of what makes the book so compelling and thought pro-

voking, and one of the reasons it should work so well for advanced students. Burton's narrative also succeeds because he is able to draw vivid characters and incidents and use them to introduce issues, ideas, and debates. John C. Calhoun, for instance, is the window into southern arguments for minority rights and sectional equality; while the New York City Draft Riots introduce the discussion of Republican wartime policies, economic equality (and inequality), and newfound government activism.

The narrative begins by emphasizing the "deep ambivalence" that antebellum Americans felt toward commerce and the market, an attitude that generated great anxiety among both those who benefited and those left behind. One consequence was the outpouring of reform movements, attempts by men and women to gain control of their lives, and the nation, when it seemed to be spinning out of control. Burton emphasizes the moral imperatives that ran through these decades and movements, ultimately driving the sections apart. "As the millennial hopes of women and men seemed increasingly jeopardized, Americans from South and North, East and West, came to identify difference with danger. The nation appeared threatened by extremism" (p. 55). Southern men believed they were under assault by "radical" northern reformers, and responded with an extreme pro-slavery argument aimed at "retrieving conservatism and social harmony" (p. 84). In turn, more and more northerners concluded that the "mudsill theory ran counter to" their "view of a slow progression toward millennial perfection" (p. 84). Burton tells the story smoothly, emphasizing the cultural, moral imperatives within the familiar political narrative of sectionalism.

The story of the war is likewise told through familiar events and personalities, but again elevated by Burton's accessible and engaging prose. As other authors have done, Burton underscores the length and destructiveness of the war as critical in shaping the course of emancipation. Had slavery ended in a different way–as in Brazil or Cuba, for instance, through a long and gradual process–nineteenth-century America would have been a very different place: "Such an end to slavery in the United States might have forfeited the Age of Lincoln's most enduring achievement: inscription into the nation's founding document the principle of equal rights without regard to race" (p. 133). The internal collapse of the southern war effort facilitated slavery's demise and also sealed the fate of Confederate armies. In Burton's narrative, the growing support for equality and freedom gained strength as the casualties mounted, as slaves ran away and seized their opportunities for freedom, as African American men joined the Union Army, and as more and more disaffected southern whites protested the seeming inequalities of the Confederate war effort. The Republicans, by contrast, succeeded with "great consistency in developing and marketing" a new and "particular vision of freedom and order," one that encompassed not only politics but also a reconfigured "commercial order" (p. 233).

Burton's central theme is most evident in his discussion of postwar America and the debate over freedom that was unleashed by the Union victory and Thirteenth Amendment. As many readers of this list know, the author has written extensively on the issue of voting rights and vote dilution, arguing that meaningful suffrage was critical to whatever "success" there was during Reconstruction. Not surprisingly, these issues figure prominently in the final section of *The Age of Lincoln*. The relationships between suffrage and citizenship; between democracy and suffrage; and between education, rights, and citizenship all captured public attention in the years after 1865. Burton navigates the waters of postwar violence and racial politics with expertise that few can match. In a wonderful paragraph he summarizes the dramatic, and hopeful, changes that occurred during the 1860s; but it ends in a sad, wistful fashion: "The goal of reconstructing government on racial equality, while far more wide-ranging, was never predestined for failure" (p. 298). With even greater force Burton details the reign of bloody terror that "brought down the republican vision" of interracial democracy: "too many whites deliberately chose lawlessness precisely because they demanded a system that would adjudicate their interests only" (p. 302). African Americans, of course, relied on northern whites' willingness to help them defend the right of suffrage–that was, Burton concludes, the "weakness of Lincoln's new meaning of freedom" (p. 313). This failure was particularly evident in Homer Plessy's defeat at the Supreme Court, in which only Justice John Harlan "articulated Lincoln's vision of freedom" (p. 320). By then the nation had descended into a nightmare of racism and lynching that permeated white America. The optimism of democratic equality and millennial patriotism lived on among African Americans and a small minority of whites.

As well as *The Age of Lincoln* synthesizes the Civil War era, it is the final two chapters that will stand out for many readers. Here, Burton extends his analysis through the end of the century, tracing the demise of Lincoln's cherished equality of opportunity and rule of law as they collapsed under the weight of corporate power and individualistic greed. The conflict over racial equality was transformed into one more strictly of class, with work-

ers everywhere the losers. Men like Eugene Debs continued the struggle, but without success. "For Debs as for Lincoln, politics was finally an act of faith. That the regime he challenged sneered at him, marginalized him, called him a traitor and a criminal, and finally jailed him shows how the corporatism that Lincoln sponsored ultimately subverted the fairness that Lincoln himself stood for" (p. 345). Burton concludes with the Populists–"the last of Lincoln's people, the last whose concern for racial justice and millennial perfection were based on faith in the goodness of the common man" (p. 353). After their demise, Americans abandoned the millennial hopes that had driven so much of the century's history in favor of material, secular progress.

Burton, however, refuses to finish on a wholly pessimistic note, concluding that even today, "as in the Age of Lincoln, moral choice, democratic citizenship, and equality still mingle" (p. 369). The book was published before the most recent presidential election, a contest whose outcome might be seen as evidence supporting Burton's central thesis, and, more particularly, validating Lincoln's own faith in equality of opportunity and the rule of law, and fulfilling the Reconstruction dream of interracial republican democracy.

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