H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

George S. McGovern. *Abraham Lincoln.* The American Presidents Series. New York: Times Books, 2008. 208 pp. $22.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8050-8345-3.

James M. McPherson. *Abraham Lincoln: A Presidential Life.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 96 pp. $12.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-537452-0.

Reviewed by Joshua Camper (Mississippi State University)
Published on H-CivWar (November, 2009)
Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle

The Essence of Lincoln

James M. McPherson, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (1988), the *New York Times*' bestseller *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam* (2002), and *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (1997) (for which he obtained a Lincoln Prize), has written a superb biography of our sixteenth president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln. What makes this book even more impressive is that McPherson managed to write this biography in sixty-five pages, not including endnotes and the bibliography. In the preface, McPherson explains why he undertook the daunting task of writing such a brief biography about a president who led the country through one of its most trying times: during the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth, numerous biographies would appear that would range in different word counts. "Amid this cascade of information, I believe there is room for a brief biography that captures the essential events and meaning of Lincoln's life without oversimplification or overgeneralization" (p. xi).

The book's eight chapters can be divided into two main sections. The first section discusses Lincoln's life leading to the presidency. The main themes covered include his early childhood, relationship with his father, early political career, relationship with Mary Todd, rise through the Republican Party, and election in 1860. The second section details Lincoln's presidency during the Civil War, particularly his frustrations with Union army commanders, and how he handled the Border States, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the 1864 presidential election. The chapter ends with Lincoln's death.

McPherson has produced a remarkable work. Just as in *Crossroads of Freedom*, he addresses Lincoln's slow approach to the abolition of slavery and his ultimate commitment to that policy once he reached his decision. This biography also stresses that while Lincoln was a flawed individual who served as commander in chief during the nation's greatest trial, he provided an unwavering determination that laid the foundation for Union success. McPherson is extremely effective, as he is in his other works, in using direct quotations. This book uses quotes from Lincoln to offer the reader a sense of what was going through his mind at particular moments in his life. This method allows Lincoln a voice in the narration and provides a personal touch. Through these quotations, McPherson is successful in illustrating Lincoln's frustrations in his personal and professional life. Overall, McPherson succeeds in his intention of producing a simple narrative history of Lincoln's life; he covers the main points without getting bogged down in gritty detail.

The book does possess one major weakness in that McPherson does not provide a definite thesis statement. Only by completing the book will the reader fully understand that McPherson set out to present Lincoln as a flawed human being who possessed a strong determination to see this country through one of its most trying times. The book should be accessible to a wide readership. It will be useful to anyone in the general public who wants to learn about Lincoln. Due to its concise nature, the book will be particularly useful in an undergraduate history survey class.

George S. McGovern, a United States senator from South Dakota from 1963 to 1981 and the Democratic nominee for president in 1972, received a PhD in American history and government at Northwestern University. McGovern's biography of Lincoln is similar to McPherson's and William E. Gienapp's *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America: A Biography* (2002). Following their

examples, McGovern does not seek to present new insights, but to compress vast amounts of information into 155 pages of narration. The bulk of the narrative focuses on the Civil War years. Unlike most Lincoln biographers, Gienapp included, who place emancipation at the forefront of Lincoln's presidency, McGovern provides equal attention to Lincoln's political, economic, military, and social decisions. He also stresses the importance of the oftentimes overlooked Homestead Act, transcontinental railroad, and Legal Tender Act. At the end of the book, McGovern includes a useful timeline that highlights the major events of Lincoln's life.

This book will be useful to the general public and undergraduates. Unlike McPherson's, it will also benefit graduate students. Throughout the work, he incorporates a variety of different narratives. One can easily find the history of politics as McGovern discusses the Whig, Democratic, and Republican parties; the history of slavery is discussed as it pertained to the territories, the Dred Scott case, and abolition; the history of secession is analyzed from the Nullification Crisis in the 1830s to the South's response to Lincoln's election; economic history is addressed with a discussion about financing the war, the first income tax, and excise imposts; westward expansion makes an appearance with the Homestead Act and railroad development; constitutional history appears in Lincoln's musings over whether or not he had the right to interfere with slavery and the Thirteenth Amendment; and finally military history is explored. These topics should promote lively discussions.

While the book possesses many strengths, it also has a couple of weaknesses. As with McPherson's book, McGovern never presents a clear thesis. It is obvious from the introduction and through reading the book that the objective is to present Lincoln's shortcomings and strengths, but this is never clearly stated. The second weakness is that the book offers no visual aids, such as pictures or maps. Pictures would have been useful to illustrate key individuals and maps would have been beneficial to represent the military campaigns discussed.

These two books are well written and interesting to read. They should benefit both those who want to learn about Lincoln for the first time and those who want to continue their study. By exploring his imperfections as well as his strengths to illustrate a complex man, McPherson and McGovern have shown why Lincoln is considered one of America's greatest presidents during a pivotal moment in our history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Joshua Camper. Review of McGovern, George S., *Abraham Lincoln* and McPherson, James M., *Abraham Lincoln: A Presidential Life.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. November, 2009.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25599

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.