

Edward Steers Jr. *Lincoln Legends: Myths, Hoaxes, and Confabulations Associated with Our Greatest President*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007. xvii + 264 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2466-7.

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Demystifying Lincoln

The burden of the presidency is one of those commonplaces worn threadbare, but for the greatest of those who held that office, it holds doubly true: first, because only monumental crises prepare chief executives for places on monuments, and second, because only those who become household words win the tabloid notoriety of ill-starred stars. The world will little note the domestic travails of those that history would not long remember. John Tyler could have fathered fourteen children or fourteen alligators, for all that the public cares, and not even the revelation that Franklin Pierce was a medical officer in the Korean War or that Rutherford Hayes's successor in office was an overweight cat would be enough to sell papers. It is only with the Lincolns and Washingtons that every aspect of their private lives becomes the stuff that dreams are made on.

As Edward Steers Jr. shows, Abraham Lincoln is positively encrusted with fiction and fable. Snobs and North Carolinians cannot believe that such genius as the sixteenth president's could have come from such lowly stock as Thomas Lincoln, and those wanting to deck their own family trees have spread tales of other men putting Nancy Hanks in the family way. For many a Christian, demonstrating Lincoln's baptism, done secretly in a river in the dead of winter, has been essential to the president's eternal salvation, and they rest their case on the creative memories of ministers who could not possibly have caught the trains that they said they did to do the secret business that nobody else was witness to their doing.

Only the Almighty could know for sure, though it seems probable that he would have had a few choice words with the clerics on their arrival about the unwisdom of bearing false witness. Everybody knows that Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address on the back of an envelope, and that his remarks fell with the loudest and dullest of thuds on a torpid audience; and enough Americans to people Kentucky can swear to having seen the cabin in which Lincoln was born. In these and so many cases, what people do not know about the president matters less than what they do know that is just plain not so.

Steers could not have pulverized every legend about Lincoln without writing a book with a shorter word count than the entire Wikipedia. To his credit, he does dispel some of the hoariest and hardiest among them, and not all of them for the first time: much of the book looks like a reworking or an outtake from his two previous books about Lincoln's assassination. In *Lincoln Legends*, Steers sets to rest the undying tale of those missing pages from John Wilkes Booth's diary that would have exposed the role of powerful figures in the conspiracy against Lincoln's life. He pulls apart the theory of the president's homosexuality, or at least as far as vehement expostulation can do the job where the evidence cannot be explained away all that easily. He makes very choice mincemeat of the barking-mad proposition that Booth killed the president to avenge a homosexual advance—which, if true, would indicate that the secretary of state, the vice president, and other prominent administration

officials had made like overtures, since they, too, were among the Booth conspiracy's targets.

Every little bit helps, of course, but readers may feel by the end that while they "know" a lot less about Lincoln, they do not know any more. The real man remains as elusive as ever, because beyond the legends, Steers can only give side glimpses to the man. Naturally, fuller accounts can be found elsewhere: Michael Burlingame's, David Donald's, and Richard Current's, among the best. Indeed, every scholar has tried to get right with Lincoln, as more than one of them described it. The man they limn has most of the same features in common, though the divergences are distinct. Was he radical or conservative? Was he a pragmatist or an idealist, the Great Emancipator or the Great Equivocator, the last of the Whigs or the first among a new kind of Republicans? Did he know exactly where he was taking the country in the days before he died, or improvising as ever? Was he crimped or did he thrive on the "team of rivals" that infested his cabinet, pursuing their own political and personal agendas as earnestly as most of them did the public good? From the many accounts, readers still may be tempted to paraphrase the president himself—if aware that they are paraphrasing one of the many good things he never said: "God must have loved Abraham Lincoln, he made so many of him."

Those questions count, and they go to the heart of the real problem described in this book. Almost all of the "legends" about Lincoln have little to do with the qual-

ities and policies that made him great enough for people to care about the legends in the first place. What log cabin he was born in matters infinitely less than what he did with power in the White House. His love affair with Anne Rutledge, if affair there was, tells nothing about his importance compared with his love for the Union, now and forever, one and inseparable. It was not so much what God he served as how his actions served his country that should take first place. That they do not may speak to the remarkable ability of many to load themselves with the trivia from his private life that offer some link, some affinity with their own.

Whether serious historians of the Civil War and Reconstruction need to give *Lincoln Legends* a glance is, however, beside the point. Steers has written a book almost certain to appeal to that very wide audience uninterested in exploring the complexity of policymaking or studying Lincoln's role in momentous events. There is a place for those writings. Alas, that place is on the shelf of similar books, all of them challenging this legend or that about the Great Emancipator or fostering new ones. No book like *Lincoln Legends* can inoculate the reading public forever from accounts blaming Lincoln's assassination on Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Vice President Andrew Johnson, or the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes. Of such works there can be no end, and books anecdotal and antidotal will advance, row on gleaming row, all the way into the distant future. Nothing can kill legends, or quell the legend writers.

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