

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Frank J. Williams, William D. Pederson, eds. *Lincoln Lessons: Reflections on America's Greatest Leader*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009. 192 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2891-8.

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Published on H-CivWar (February, 2010)

Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson

How I Met Your Sixteenth President

This is a slender and eclectic volume of brief personal reflections on the leadership of Abraham Lincoln. The authors, who range from Pulitzer Prize winners and Supreme Court justices to unknowns all share an admiration of Lincoln. Many of their essays are accounts of how they came to be interested in him and to make him the subject of their studies. Some of the pieces focus on aspects of Lincoln's leadership directly rather than through the lens of the author's experience. A few combine both approaches, showing how the personal and professional sides of a historian's life can interact to inform and enrich each other.

In the last category, the essays by Jean Baker and Edna Greene Medford stand out. Baker, in "Getting Right with Mary Lincoln," describes how her interest in Mary Lincoln grew throughout her academic career, despite (and partly because of) the resistance she encountered from male historians. She offers a provocative and enlightening account of how her own feminism developed with her recognition of the double standard historians had applied to Mary, while her understanding of Mrs. Lincoln was sharpened by her experience as a woman in the overwhelmingly male province of Lincoln studies. Medford's essay "Lincoln and African American Memory" likewise fuses the personal, political, and professional from the perspective of a scholar who "long ago became accustomed to being one of very few African Americans (and frequently the only black woman) present at Lincoln conferences and associations" (p. 93). Harry V. Jaffa's "A Political Philosopher's Defense of Lincoln" is less autobiographical than most of the other essays, and says little that will be unfamiliar to readers of his other works (*Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* [1959] and *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War* [2000]), but is made personal (and persuasive) by the passion with which he defends Lincoln's view of

equality against radical conservative theorists from John C. Calhoun to Russell Kirk.

Like Jaffa's, the essays of James McPherson ("Lincoln's Legacy for Our Time") and Doris Kearns Goodwin ("Transforming Foes to Allies") are based on their well-known writings. Goodwin discusses the origins of her *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (2005), while Mario Cuomo ("Lincoln on Democracy") gives the story behind the origin of the book of the same title (second edition, 2004), which he coedited (with Harold Holzer) at the request of Polish schoolteachers eager for Lincoln's guidance in the post-Communist era. Holzer's own "The Lincoln Visual Image: A Personal Voyage of Discovery" is more typical of the rest of the volume in giving an autobiographical account, starting in childhood, of how he came to study and write about Lincoln. Holzer's piece is enlivened by irresistible (but not ill natured) gossip about the likes and dislikes of other Lincoln collectors and writers. Craig Symonds, John Marszalek, Thomas Reed Turner, William D. Pederson, and Mackubin Thomas Owens follow this autobiographical model, offering insights they have acquired into the success of Lincoln's leadership in the context of telling how they pursued Lincoln through their own careers from elementary school student to university professor. Independent writer Edward Steers Jr. ("Tell Me What You Want to Believe, and I'll Tell You What You Will Believe") varies the format with an account of two days in 1977 spent in the company of Lincoln assassination expert James O. Hall that "introduced me to the inner sanctum of the Lincoln assassination," and taught him the lesson that titles his essay (p. 139). Coeditor Frank J. Williams concludes the volume with a description of how he became "The Compleat Lincolnator."

A few of the essays are less than successful. Readers will find their curiosity to visit Fort Wayne's legendary Lincoln Museum piqued by former director Joan

Flinspach's enthusiastic description of its present attractions and future prospects—only to find their travel plans dashed by the laconic editor's note that follows, indicating that the museum was permanently closed by the Lincoln Financial Group in 2008; the museum collection has since gone to the Indiana State Museum in Indianapolis, but availability at this date is uncertain. Sandra Day O'Connor's blandly titled "Suspension of Habeas Corpus" reads as though it had been written over a weekend by a harried law clerk, for the justice to give as an oral presentation to a junior high school audience on Monday morning. Its lack of any personal commentary, patronizing tone, overreliance on a limited number of sources, and occasional factual errors put this piece on a level below the rest.

Is this a worthwhile book? It is not meaty enough to assign in an undergraduate course, much less a graduate seminar, but that clearly was never its purpose. Social historians might glean from it some evidence of the reverence with which Lincoln was regarded in mid-twentieth-century elementary school classrooms, where many of the contributors first encountered images of the Great Emancipator. The real audience for this book, however, is the army of enthusiasts who have attended a Lincoln conference in the last decade and heard one or more of the contributors speak. For them, reading this will be like spending an hour listening to stories from an old friend or two, and meeting some new ones who share their passion for the sixteenth president.

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Citation: Gerald Prokopowicz. Review of Williams, Frank J.; Pederson, William D., eds., *Lincoln Lessons: Reflections on America's Greatest Leader*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. February, 2010.

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