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Noah Brooks. *Lincoln Observed: Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. xii + 291 pp. $25.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5842-0.

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Observing Lincoln

The time may soon be approaching when we will have, in print and readily available, nearly every primary source worth owning about Abraham Lincoln. The University of Nebraska Press has been busily resurrecting a number of such titles. Harold Holzer has edited two excellent volumes of correspondence received by Lincoln while he was president. We also have Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis's, *Herndon's Informants* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), a compilation of materials taken from the Herndon-Weik collection, a very valuable resource.

Following this trend, Michael Burlingame has edited *Lincoln Observed: Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks*, a collection of newspaper accounts of the president and his time written by a correspondent for the *Sacramento Daily Union*. Professor Burlingame is the author of *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), a judicious psychological study of our sixteenth president. He knows a great deal about the vast and sometimes confusing world of Lincolnia, and is therefore a discerning judge concerning what is and is not reliable information.

This is important, for one of the first questions raised by the publication of Brooks' correspondence must be: was Brooks a reliable observer of the president? He spent a great deal of time in Lincoln's company, and came to know the him well. But nineteenth-century journalists were notorious for their almost gleeful bias when reporting news. The modern boundaries between fact, supposition, opinion, and editorializing were more fuzzy–and even nonexistent–for Brooks and his contemporaries than scholars who utilize journalistic sources would prefer.

In Brooks' case, his bias surfaced in his undisguised, at times almost gushing admiration for Lincoln. "A nobler and purer nature than his never animated man," he wrote of Lincoln, describing him as "patient, patriotic, persevering and single-hearted" (p. 67). His love of Lincoln was not really political. Brooks was no ideologue, and he did not approach Lincoln from the point of view of a conservative or a radical Republican. Rather, Brooks admired in Lincoln what many others found so exasperating: namely, the president's ability to steer a steady course between extremes. Lincoln was "one of the most resolutely practical of men," Brooks wrote, who possessed a "genius for splitting the difference" (pp. 51, 126). To some, this made Lincoln seem unprincipled; for Brooks, it made him heroic, and he painted Lincoln's pragmatism in heroic terms. What one gets in *Lincoln Observed* is therefore a relentlessly positive, upbeat account of Lincoln's presidential decisions, colored not so much by political ideology as by sincere admiration and friendship.

Such biases aside–or one might argue because of them–Burlingame makes a convincing case for Brooks' veracity. He devotes a good portion of the book's introduction to this issue, pointing out that Brooks had earned Lincoln's trust to the extent that the president seriously considered appointing the California reporter as his private secretary. Burlingame also quotes several contemporaries of Lincoln and Brooks who corroborated their close relationship and suggested that, in the words of one former congressman, "no man living had better opportunity to know Lincoln's mind than Noah Brooks" (p. 2). Burlingame has also taken great pains to present points of view at odds with Brooks' observations and interpretations.

This makes for a careful, very well-edited volume, with copious footnotes and annotations. These technical matters aside, however, I have come to think that, past a certain point, one simply develops an instinct for these matters. Read enough secondhand accounts of Lincoln–and there are very, very many– and one eventually acquires a visceral feel for the evidence. So does Brooks' account of Lincoln "feel" right? Does it ring true?

For the most part it does. Brooks resisted the urge,

prevalent among many observers of Lincoln, to oversentimentalize the president's every word and action. He was present with Lincoln in a variety of settings–conferences, formal presentations, ceremonies, troop reviews–and he offered his readers a kaleidoscope of shifting presidential behaviors. Lincoln "smiled benevolently" upon African-American troops passing before him during a military parade; he "was very mad" at a premature press release of Union army troop movements; he shook the hand of an old friend during a crowded White House reception without at first recognizing him, then apologized, saying cryptically he was "thinking of a man down South"; he rather absent-mindedly forgot exactly which revisions he made to the Gettysburg Address among the versions he wrote, delivered at the battlefield, then released to the press; he cracked a joke during a cabinet meeting; he became visibly annoyed at a delegation of Republican party functionaries seeking a favor; he schmoozed reporters–including Brooks–by praising their home states. All of this has the air of chaos, of messiness, which one would expect of a complicated man caught in the most complicated of times. "He said quaintly that nothing could touch the tired spot within, which was all tired," Brooks wrote of a weary, downcast Lincoln during one of innumerable troop reviews (p. 43). This has an authentic ring.

Lincoln Observed offers more than testimony about the president. Brooks' mind and pen ranged far and wide across a busy landscape. His sardonic descriptions of the crowds who attended White House receptions are often quite funny. Brooks also wrote several vivid vignettes of prominent Washington personalities–Secretary of State William Seward, for example, who "sits on the small of his back, twirling his watch guard and telling pleasant stories of the past and present" (p. 46). Brooks' lengthy portrait of the Lincoln White House is grittily realistic: Lincoln's office, for example, was "furnished with green stuff, hung around with maps and plans, with a bad portrait of Jackson over the chimney piece" (p. 84). Brooks was a colorful observer, but, as with Lincoln, he was not at all objective. For example, he developed an intense dislike for Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase–whom he described as "cold-hearted, obstinate, and enormously self-conceited"–and a mild but persistent streak of antisemitism marred several of his accounts ("men of Hebraic descent are … notoriously given to Copperhead–not to say secesh–proclivities") (pp. 119,139). Nevertheless, readers who want a feel for the atmosphere of Civil War-era Washington DC will find much of that is useful here.

Aside from its research value, *Lincoln Observed* is a good read. Many such collections are not. But Brooks wrote with verve and a discerning eye, providing descriptions of Lincoln and his times which are worth preserving. Professor Burlingame has done so with commendable care, illuminating Brooks' biases and shortcomings without diluting the color of his prose. *Lincoln Observed* is a valuable contribution to the rich and growing collection of printed primary source materials about Abraham Lincoln.

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