H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Bray. *Reading with Lincoln.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010. 272 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2995-3.

Reviewed by John Patrick Daly
Published on H-CivWar (February, 2012)
Commissioned by Martin Johnson

Lincoln Revealed through the Books He Read

Robert Bray's *Reading with Lincoln* is a welcome addition to the endless list of Abraham Lincoln titles. Do we really need another book on Lincoln? The answer in this case is a resounding and somewhat ironic, yes. It turns out that we need a book on Lincoln and books. Bray has written a masterful account of Lincoln as a reader. The catalog of books he read is impressive and fascinating and gives a new window into the man. Lincoln was a classic autodidact and to journey through his life in books is to see his mind in formation and action. Bray has to do some speculation to fill in Lincoln's library and what he actually read, but his guess work is honest and well grounded, giving his book some of the pace and interest of a mystery story.

Lincoln was an eclectic reader and read low-brow regional humor as much as he did classics and William Shakespeare. Bray, through Lincoln, brings to life the lost world of publishing and reading taste in the mid-nineteenth century. Nothing ages faster and to its detriment more than humor writing and writing on popular politics and current events. Lincoln read deeply in such literature in his time. In reconstructing Lincoln's studies Bray delivers a study of faded popular works, like those of Artemus Ward and Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby (David Ross Locke). Lincoln defied the educational snobbery and standards of his day and proselytized for regional humor and obscure Western political prose. His reading helped make him unique and also let him step into a more modern form of expression and communication confidently divorced from the long-winded, classical allusion-laden style of the politicians and academics who considered themselves his social and educational betters. This even came up in his cabinet where he regaled his colleagues with "low" humor tales taken from Ward and Nasby that mystified most of them and tried their patience. But with the benefit of hindsight we can see how Lincoln was developing a speaking, political, and writing style more attuned to the modern democracy he would not live to see.

Lincoln built his own world of expression and knowledge over a long period. Lincoln's self-education–and limited formal education–began with the moral didactics found in readers; grammars; popular versions of Aesop; and, of course, sermons and the Bible. If much of what constituted Lincoln's early reading is guesswork, the books Bray discusses are still fascinating chances to speculate about the development of Lincoln's mind. The roots of Lincoln's religious skepticism are one such puzzle. Constantin de Volney's writing on history, civilization, political philosophy, and theology in *The Ruins* (1791), now forgotten, clearly was a formative experience. Lincoln also read Thomas Paine and probably David Hume. The poetry of Robert Burns and Lord Byron–long emphasized by biographers of Lincoln–also get a strong analysis from Bray. Lincoln wrote his own poem in 1838, "The Suicide's Soliloquy," which was even darker than its title. In the realm of poetry, some authors have tried to link Lincoln's modern sensibility to his reading Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), but Bray shows that this connection of the two great contemporaries is a fabrication. Lincoln read more obscure poets, like Thomas Hood, whose satirical tone he admired.

In the books Lincoln read, both a satirical and serious vein shines through that mirrors the contours of his personality. As grammars were a key in his formative years, legal commentaries honed his early adult mind. He then turned his rational legal skills to dissecting human nature and creation itself. Robert Chamber's *Vestiges of Creation* (1844) gave Lincoln grounding in radical science. He also read Theodore Parker and other theological radicals. In one of the strongest sections of the book, Bray shows how Lincoln's views of humanity, religion, and politics found a chord in his eclectic mastery of Shakespeare. Many minds have found similar solace in the bard, but

Bray's most original and crowning achievement is his account of Lincoln's love of low-brow regional humor, especially Ward and Nasby. Lincoln really comes alive through these authors whose rough humor he performed for White House colleagues. Lincoln's psychology, as far as we can know it, in which high spirits and depressive near nihilism coexisted, reveals itself in these authors. They had humor but also a grim view of human motivations and abilities. It is a testament to Bray's skill that Shakespeare, Paine, Byron, William Blackstone, Chambers, and the others set the stage for Ward and Nasby. Bray shows the reader the rough insight into human nature both in the popular comedy that Lincoln treasured and in the better known authors. Great ideas came to life in Lincoln's bawdy jokes and jests, and that ability to inspire and instruct in a common medium was perhaps his greatest genius as a politician and a man.

Bray is to be commended for his outstanding scholarship and lively presentation of Lincoln's reading history. Lincoln spent a large portion of his life immersed in books. Bray shows that though we are immersed in Lincoln studies, a new Lincoln can still be unearthed. A man who studied so much merits much study, and Bray's originality in doing so rewards his readers.

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: John Patrick Daly. Review of Bray, Robert, *Reading with Lincoln.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. February, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31935

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