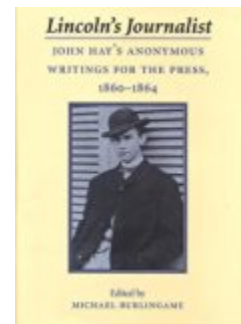


H-Net Reviews

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Michael Burlingame, ed. *Lincoln's Journalist: John Hay's Anonymous Writings for the Press, 1860-1864*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999. xxvii + 338 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2205-3.

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In recent years some students of the Civil War era have turned their scrupulous attention to the republication of important texts, some of which have been inaccessible to all but the most dedicated researchers. Others have been available in printed form only in bowdlerized versions without annotations. All Americans have benefited, for example, from Harold Holzer's 1993 edition of the Lincoln and Douglas debates, while Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis have provided a first version of those famously illegible Herndon papers. Even John Wilkes Booth's writings have been exhaustively collected and edited by John Rhodehamel and Louise Taper. Perhaps no scholar has been more indefatigable in this initiative than Michael Burlingame who has now edited and annotated three important Civil War sources—first the complete text of John Hay's previously casually edited diary and next an edition of Noah Brooks's diary. Burlingame's edition of John Hay's anonymous and pseudonymous dispatches and editorials, previously uncollected and unpublished, now joins this distinguished edited trilogy.

Certainly almost anything that John Hay wrote during the Civil War is worth reading. Not only did this moonlighting (mainly on Sundays) journalist hold the insider's job of assistant secretary to Abraham Lincoln throughout his presidency, but Hay was a perceptive and ironic observer of the war as well as life in Washington. (Technically Hay was not on the White House payroll—although Lincoln offered to pay his salary of \$1600 a year. Instead he was detailed to special service to White House first as a clerk the Pension Office and later as an army officer.) Burlingame suggests in his title that Hay is Lincoln's journalist, and he implies in his introduction that Hay adopted the opinions of Lincoln.

The exact connection will remain unknown, but there is no evidence that in a nineteenth-century precursor to the presidential leak, Lincoln used his secretary to float his administration's agendas. On the other hand there is no doubt that Hay's anonymous sketches represented the administration's spin on the events and personnel of the war. Moreover Hay was privy to meetings and conversations (once a breakfast at Willard's Hotel with four Major-Generals) that most reporters were not, so that his occasional "it is not generally known" carried some authority.

Burlingame is persuasive on the issue that Hay authored these articles and dispatches. Most come from a scrapbook in the Hay Papers at the Library of Congress, and it is unlikely that a man as well published as Hay would take the trouble to keep a scrapbook file of someone else's dispatches. Moreover there is internal evidence that makes it probable that Hay wrote the 132 dispatches and editorials included in this volume, most published in 1861 and 1862 in the *Missouri Democrat*, *Missouri Republican* and *New York World*. Not only is Hay's wonderfully prolix, opinionated, adverb-filled style on parade throughout, but his predilection for classical allusions permeates all his writing, requiring of the hardworking Burlingame yet another concept for annotation.

The war never shook Hay's dreamy sentimentalism. In a 180-word description of Georgetown in October 1861 the young journalist notes "poor old Georgetown, looking as if all the clocks must have stopped at nine o'clock, some still, hazy Sunday morning, and the natives have been, ever since, under the delusion that every day was Sunday— along the banks of the placid canal, tinged by

the thick overhanging foliage with a sombre green; past long lines of army wagons droning along the dusty road under the rays of the departing day—the dark Potomac overshadowed by the densely wooded heights . . . , on we went passing many groups of soldiers bivouacking on the road with stacked bayonets, . . . etcetera, etcetera” (pp. 111-112). (Buy the book if you want to get to the end of this quote.) Or writing on South Carolina after Union forces captured Beaufort, Port Royal, and Hilton Head in November 1861, Hay explained the earlier objections Southerners had to establishing a naval yard at Beaufort—“a fearful foreboding of the contingencies of Yankee association . . . and the blight of industry passed from the air at Beaufort— this castle of aristocratic indolence, this seat of the blackness of primal barbarism, this chosen home and realm of the Cotton-King” (p. 138).

Besides the pleasure of reading Hay, what is important about these dispatches is their contemporaneous representation of events and people. Among the noteworthy editorials are those covering Lincoln’s pilgrimage to Washington in February of 1861. Granted that Hay, twenty-three years old at the time, already had a solid affection for Lincoln, still the reports filed, in this case primarily to the *Missouri Democrat*, suggest that this trip was an important element in solidifying the people’s allegiance to the Union through the person of Lincoln. As few nineteenth century Americans ever did, those who stood along the railroad tracks from Springfield to Baltimore saw, and in some cases heard, their new leader who came to personify the nation and inspire fervent patriotism.

Once installed in the northeast bedroom of the second floor of the White House with Lincoln’s other secretary John Nicolay, Hay observed Washington, the war, Congress, soldiers and their generals, and of course the president whom he and Nicolay privately called the “Ty-

coon.” Hay reported on the death of Lincoln’s friend Edward Dickinson Baker, on the early dashed hopes at Bull Run, on the slow movement of McClellan, whom Hay held hopes for longer than most, including his boss. “Let us not lose confidence in our brave young soldier for one such lapse,” wrote Hay during the Peninsula Campaign, after the Army of the Potomac “sat down before Yorktown and entrenched themselves” (p.260-261). And at least in the first two years of the war Hay remained optimistic that one winning campaign would end the war, or “So we all think at Washington” (p. 219). Unflinchingly patriotic and devoted to Lincoln and the Union, Hay rarely broke ranks from the administration position. But his editorials, especially on the removal of Simon Cameron, suggest that he was not always privy to his close-mouthed president’s intentions. His thumbnail sketches of generals and politicians presented his opinion, informed as it were, on the abilities of the Union’s military leaders, and in one surprising example he continued to praise General Burnside. Ever sanguine, Hay is also much too optimistic about the progress of emancipation opinion in the border state of Maryland.

The significance of this material is that of any primary source. What we are privy to are one opinion-maker’s perceptions and views, which, like the war itself, change and modify in the face of events. John Hay may not be the most famous presidential secretary in American history. That distinction probably belongs to Betty Currie and Joseph Tumulty. But he surely is the best writer and most incisive observer among them and that alone makes his newspaper dispatches worth reading. Michael Burlingame deserves credit for making this possible.

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