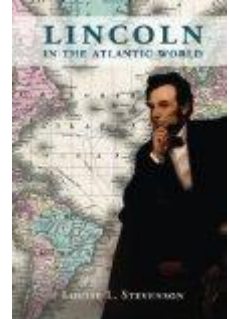


Louise L. Stevenson. *Lincoln in the Atlantic World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 283 pp. \$29.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-107-52423-1.



Reviewed by Don H. Doyle (ARENA, University of South Carolina)

Published on H-Diplo (June, 2016)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Born to poverty, Abraham Lincoln grew up with only minimal exposure to even the crudest forms of schooling on America's western frontier. He was driven by an unusual thirst for knowledge of the world and came to stand among the most eloquent champions of democracy of his time and our own. Goldwin Smith, an Oxford don, complimented the late president: "Not a sovereign in Europe, however trained from the cradle for state pomps, and however prompted by statesmen and courtiers, could have uttered himself more regally than did Lincoln at Gettysburg." [1] During the Civil War, Lincoln displayed an extraordinary talent for placing the American debacle within a broad global context that invited foreigners to see it as their fight, too. America's war with itself, he told the world, was a much grander contest over the future of democracy and free labor, one in which all peoples, as well as future generations, shared a vital stake. Our struggle, he told Congress in 1861, "embraces more than the fate of these United States. It presents to the whole family of man, the question, whether a constitutional re-

public, or a democracy—a government of the people, by the same people—can, or cannot, maintain its territorial integrity, against its own domestic foes." [2]

In her ingenious book, *Lincoln in the Atlantic World*, Louise L. Stevenson tells us how this rustic American provincial became, if not cosmopolitan in the usual sense, worldly in his way. Her book takes us through a series of meandering, sometimes bewildering, but always novel and rewarding "lessons" that came to Lincoln (and other receptive Americans, we assume), from beyond the narrow confines of his own lived experience. He spent most of his life in the rural Midwest and never traveled outside the United States. All that he knew of the world beyond came to him through the printed word or conversations with others, especially encounters with foreign immigrants who poured into the United States after 1848. His early speeches and writings reveal his clear understanding of America as part of the Atlantic world. For Lincoln, the American experiment in self-government, based on universal prin-

ciples of human equality and freedom, stood imperiled by enemies within, namely the Southern Slave Power, and by aristocratic adversaries of democracy abroad.

The book opens with a moving exposition on the international reaction to Lincoln's assassination, told mainly through hundreds of condolence letters that poured into US legations around the world in 1865. These cries of sympathy and outrage made it clear that foreigners understood America's war, just as Lincoln had, as part of a wider global contest over the republican experiment in government by the people. In death, Lincoln was transformed from a national hero to a global martyr for the cause of democracy and universal emancipation.

The chapter "African Lessons" analyzes James Riley's *Narrative*, published in 1817, which was one of several books Lincoln listed in a campaign biography as having influenced his view of the world. *Narrative* was a spellbinding account of American sailors captured by Barbary pirates and sold into slavery in northern Africa. Lincoln never revealed exactly what he took away from Riley's chronicle, but Stevenson does a fine job of explaining what its lessons might have been for him, and how they reinforced the future president's abhorrence of slavery.

The ensuing chapter, "European Lessons," has President-elect Lincoln deliberately striking a more radical pose by growing a beard and donning a "Kossuth hat," both signifying his bold solidarity with international republicanism. Though John Quincy Adams and Martin Van Buren sported robust "mutton chop" sideburns, Lincoln was the first president to wear a full beard. Stevenson argues that the American fashion for beards among the republican middle class began with the commotion surrounding the 1851-52 visit of the celebrated Hungarian revolutionary, Lajos Kossuth, whose bushy whiskers were indeed striking. She also asserts, without convincing evidence, that President-elect Lincoln, en route to Washing-

ton, donned a Kossuth hat given to him by supporters in New York City. Stevenson's argument for Lincoln's purpose in striking a more republican pose would be more persuasive if he or others had testified to such gestures of solidarity at the time. If he brandished the Kossuth hat to make a statement, why did he not continue wearing it instead of his decidedly bourgeois top hat? The case for Lincoln's affinities toward international republican ideology, in any case, is more convincingly made by the author's many references to his words and ideas, rather than his dress or whiskers.

Lincoln's "German Lessons" take us to the many immigrants from the German states who had settled in the Midwest, many of them fleeing repression after the failed revolution of 1848. The German 48ers were revolutionary, or "red," republicans whose abhorrence of slavery and aristocracy drew them to the Republican Party. But the party made an alliance with the nativist Know Nothing movement, and this left German voters divided and therefore much sought after by both parties. Lincoln worked hard to win German votes in 1860. He funded Theodore Canisius to publish a German-language newspaper to spread Lincoln's message to German voters in their own idiom. He took pains to distance himself from the nativist Know Nothing Party and linked their xenophobia and anti-Catholicism to prejudice against blacks, both rooted in bigotry against people based on their circumstances of birth. "When the Know-Nothings get control," he wrote in 1855, the Declaration of Independence "will read 'all men are created equal, except negroes, *and foreigners and Catholics*.' When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty" (p. 121). If some assert the principle of equality does not apply to blacks, what is to stop them from excluding others? Lincoln asked (p. 145). Historians debate whether Lincoln owed his victory to German voters, but there is no question that he felt indebted to them. Once elected president, he appointed numerous Ger-

mans, Canisius among them, to diplomatic posts and other government positions. He also made good use of Francis Lieber, a German immigrant whom the Union Army commissioned to draft a field manual to guide officers coping with an enemy in an undeclared civil war. The Lieber Code, as it was known, helped justify Lincoln's emancipation decree as a military necessity and served as an important milestone in the evolution of the international law of war.

The chapter entitled "English Lessons" features John Bright, the Radical advocate of American-style democracy for Britain, who was also a stalwart champion of the Union during the Civil War. During the *Trent* crisis in November and December 1861, the British press and much of the political leadership were aflame with fury over the news that a Union naval officer had apprehended a British mail ship at sea and apprehended two Confederate envoys en route to Europe. Bright made a courageous speech at Rochdale, appealing to the deep bonds that united America and Britain and warning of the dangers of siding with slavery. Bright also wrote a persuasive letter to his friend, US senator Charles Sumner, who read it to Lincoln and his cabinet when they met to decide whether to release the captured Confederate envoys. Lincoln came to regard Bright foremost among America's friends in Britain. In his White House office, he hung a large portrait of Bright, and the night he died Lincoln carried a newspaper clipping in which John Bright proclaimed Lincoln's reelection as bracing proof that "Republican institutions ... can bear a nation safely and steadily through the most desperate perils" (p. 133). Like all the chapters in this book, the narrative wanders, free of chronological order, driving toward no single coherent conclusion. Readers, nonetheless, are rewarded in the end with an informative review of this highly strained episode in the "special relationship" supposed to have existed between Britain and America—alas, a relationship fraught as

often with jealous rivalry and spite as with friendship and understanding.

"Lessons from International Law" begins with an analysis of Francis Carpenter's majestic oil painting, *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln*, which documented that moment in July 1862 when Lincoln first unveiled his emancipation policy to his cabinet. We learn about the various portraits on the walls and the legal texts, newspapers, and other documents shelved or strewn about the office, all playing their part in the story Carpenter wanted to tell. The artist, himself a devoted abolitionist, illustrated the president and his cabinet about to take the nation in a dramatic turn toward the destruction of slavery, a change in policy that was grounded in international law and deep thought about the necessity of new measures to answer the demands of war.

Lincoln's emancipation policy aimed at disrupting Southern society and economic production by encouraging slaves to emancipate themselves, and at enhancing the Union's manpower advantage by enlisting slaves to fight for their freedom as Union soldiers. Lincoln also understood his emancipation edict as foreign policy. Though Secretary of State William Seward warned him that Europe's governing and business classes might use the Proclamation to justify intervention, Lincoln hoped that by transforming the war into a morally inspiring contest for liberty against slavery he would win public sympathy abroad and make it impossible for foreign powers to side with slavery. Both Lincoln and Seward had a good grasp of *realpolitik*, but the president's affinity for transatlantic republican ideology proved reliable in the end. The reception of the initial proclamation of September 1862 was everything Seward had feared: the press was full of vitriolic denunciations of Lincoln's desperate appeal to racial warfare. Once Lincoln enacted the Proclamation the following January, however, hundreds of public meetings and resolutions proclaimed their sup-

port for the “Union and Liberty,” the new Republican motto.

The book closes with an interesting interpretation of *Our American Cousin*, the play Lincoln was viewing at Ford’s Theatre when John Wilkes Booth shot him in April 1865. She reminds us that Booth originally planned to kidnap the president, in a fantastic scheme to force release of Confederate POWs and reignite the Southern will to fight. On April 11, Lincoln gave an impromptu speech to a small crowd outside the White House, and in it he praised efforts in Louisiana to establish a genuine republic and extend education and voting rights to black citizens. He promised similar expansion of republican principles to Union soldiers and “intelligent” black civilians. Booth, a violent racist, was in the audience and was overheard saying that this would be the last speech Lincoln ever made.

The play’s author, Tom Taylor, was a well-known British playwright and contributor to the popular London humor magazine *Punch*. His play is a comedy of manners that contrasts Lord Dundreary, a pretentious, ineffectual aristocrat, against Asa Trenchard of Vermont, a rustic American braggart who comes to his ancestral home, Trenchard Manor, to claim an inheritance from a deceased relative who had left England to make his fortune in America. While the English ladies swoon over this American “Apollo of the prairie,” Asa is smitten by Mary, a hard-working, honest milkmaid. Mary, it turns out, is a direct descendant of the deceased émigré whose legacy Asa has come to claim. Professing his love for Mary, Asa gallantly burns the will that proves his claim to the estate, thus allowing Mary to inherit it. Taylor’s melodrama valorizes American democratic virtue at the expense of British aristocratic pretense and points toward a happy future for the honest common people on both sides of what John Bright called the Anglo-American “transatlantic nation.” This amusing play Abraham Lincoln was enjoying so much on that terrible evening of April

14, 1865, Stevenson tells us, “also sounded the advent of a republican future—still little more than a hope in Great Britain, France, and the German states, but a future now closer to realization in the United States because of the leadership of Abraham Lincoln” (p. 225).

Stevenson’s book is not a study of the intellectual underpinnings of Lincoln’s foreign policy; for that Kevin Peraino’s *Lincoln in the World* (2013) and Howard Jones’s *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom* (1999) suffice wonderfully. Instead, Stevenson seeks to illuminate the president’s view of the world and America’s place within it. She succeeds in giving readers an unexpected portrait of a self-taught, American provincial who became worldly in his understanding of America’s experiment in self-government and in his grasp of what was at stake in the Union’s struggle to survive, not only for America but for all nations, and not only for his day but “for a vast future also.”[3]

Notes

[1]. Smith, “President Lincoln,” *Macmillan’s* 11 (June 1865): 302.

[2]. Lincoln, Message to Congress in Special Session, July 4, 1861, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4: 438, available on the Abraham Lincoln Association website, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln4/1:741?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

[3]. Lincoln, Annual Message to Congress, December 3, 1861, *Collected Works*, 5: 53, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln5/1:87?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Don H. Doyle. Review of Stevenson, Louise L, *Lincoln in the Atlantic World*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2016.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46101>



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