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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard J. Carwardine. *Lincoln.* London: Longman, 2003. xviii + 352 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-03279-8.

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Published on H-CivWar (December, 2003)

The Power of Historical Circumstances

It just may be that it takes the distance of an ocean to gain new insights about Abraham Lincoln and his presidency. From his academic post at Oxford University halfway across the world, Richard J. Carwardine is removed from much of the mythology regarding Abraham Lincoln. Thus, he has written a superb political biography of one of America's best-loved presidents in which he refuses to lapse into that tired old folklore that tends to dominate the field of Lincoln studies. Instead, Carwardine analyzes Lincoln within his unique historical and political context, arguing that Lincoln was as much a product of his era as he was a producer of historical events.

Lincoln is one book in the series entitled Profiles in Power, which includes biographies of world leaders like Oliver Cromwell, Maximilien Robespierre, Jawaharlal Nehru, Adolf Hitler, Benito Juarez, Catherine De' Medici, and Woodrow Wilson, to name a few. The goal of the series is not to rehash the political biographies of world leaders but rather to examine the mechanisms of their power and analyze their individual approaches to and uses of that power. Although Carwardine's narrative discusses Lincoln's political perspectives and his political career leading up to the 1860 presidential election, his contribution to this series is focused on his presidency and on Lincoln's political style in the employment of the power that his elected office afforded.

In the book, Carwardine addresses the challenge of examining Lincoln's political power by immersing himself in Lincoln's words. This reliance on primary materials should not strike historians as unique, but so much of the scholarship on Lincoln published every year depends to a great extent on previous studies of Lincoln and, therefore, tends to retrace old historiographical paths and to sing familiar interpretive tunes. Relying heavily on *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* and *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, Carwardine charts his own path through the Lincoln manuscript material and focuses on clues therein about Lincoln's personal and religious perspectives on the topics, specifically slavery, that occupied the minds of antebellum Americans.[1] Carwardine is well versed in the Lincoln historiography and acknowledges the canon of secondary literature on Lincoln, including David Herbert Donald. Yet Carwardine is confident in his own understanding of the era and of Lincoln himself, and, as a result, his perspective is specifically guided, his narrative is fresh, and his conclusions are insightful.

The first chapter deals directly with Lincoln's political ambition and vision, including the roots of what Carwardine defines as Lincoln's "moral power" and the religious roots of Lincoln's approach to politics. The author recognizes Lincoln as "ambitious, enterprising, and determined" in his political life, and he quickly dispels any misconception on the part of his readers that Lincoln was a passive participant in politics (p. 39). The second and third chapters analyze the historical context of the development of mass participation in the political process and the increasingly entrenched system of party politics. It is in these chapters that Carwardine makes his most important contribution, arguing that the historical and political circumstances of the 1840s and 1850s created an environment in which Lincoln–a man with political ambition and talents for gauging and responding to public opinion–could ascend to a position of national power. Carwardine argues that it is important to recognize the "external sources" of Lincoln's authority "as much as his own endowments," and that Lincoln's political success was the result of personal drive, the force of public opinion, and the organizing machine of democracy (p. xii).

The fourth chapter examines Lincoln as president-elect and the ways in which holding the party line and building northern support for the coming Civil War occupied Lincoln's time as he anticipated his assumption of the country's highest office. The fifth and sixth chapters discuss the Lincoln presidency, but not with a traditional political and militaristic perspective. Carwardine is not concerned with Lincoln's day-to-day strate-

gic and administrative decisions, but rather he assesses Lincoln from an intellectual, psychological, and religious perspective. He seeks to understand Lincoln's perceptions of his power and of his leadership. Chapter 5 examines Lincoln's developing religious faith and morals in regard to prosecuting the war and transforming it from a war for union to a war for emancipation. Chapter 6 argues that Lincoln was conscious of and actively engaged in the mobilization of popular support for the war effort, yet at the same time he remained cognizant of the brute instrument of his power–the Union Army–and the role that physical power and coercion could, and should, play in the Union's moral, as well as military, victory.

The book also includes chapter endnotes and a chronology of Lincoln's life, which combines the personal and the political. Generally, Carwardine's footnotes are basic citation notes. However, the author does provide short bibliographic essays on Lincoln scholarship for each chapter of the book. These descriptive essays offer a window into the literature on which Carwardine relied most heavily for particular topics covered and interpretations presented within the book.

Overall, Carwardine offers a balanced interpretation of Lincoln's employment of political power. He argues that Lincoln was not squeamish about utilizing the power of his political office and the circumstances of war to press the limits of the constitution, as in the suspension of habeas corpus. However, Carwardine also asserts, although somewhat indirectly, that Lincoln's moral center guided his political actions and, at least by the war's end, religion played a significant role in Lincoln's conduct of the war.

Carwardine is a fine scholar and he has not failed to reaffirm his talents as a researcher and, most notably, as a writer. Good historians often detract from their scholarship with poorly organized and awkwardly written prose. Carwardine does not. *Lincoln* is exceedingly well written and the narrative is engaging. However, I would be remiss if I did not share two small quibbles that I have with this otherwise very fine book.

First, Carwardine completely ignores Lincoln's law practice as a context in which Lincoln developed his view of politics and of political power. Perhaps that omission strikes a particular chord with the specific bias of this reviewer. Yet it is hard to believe that Lincoln, who drank up the knowledge of his every endeavor, did not at least shade his political vision with the keen eyes of a lawyer. Having spent twenty-five years practicing law, Lincoln was as influenced by the legal profession and by his direct interaction with the structure of American law as he was by the historical convergence of mass political participation, the growing influence of political public opinion, and the machinations of political parties. Lincoln was a product of his historical context, and one of those contexts was his legal career.

Second, Carwardine is a bit too comfortable with the reminiscent material he utilizes to support his psychological and inner religious interpretations of Lincoln's political philosophy and vision. He makes use of sources such as *Herndon's Lincoln* by Jesse W. Weik and William H. Herndon, and *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, which is acceptable, especially given the current hospitable scholarly environment for previously out-of-favor Lincoln reminiscent materials.[2] However, Carwardine does not adequately interrogate informant memories of Lincoln. For example, he accepts a claim by Isaac Cogdal, a friend of Lincoln's from New Salem, Illinois, that the president-to-be believed in God. Carwardine uses it as an example of how religion influenced Lincoln's early opinions. In a note, he admits that the eminent Lincoln scholar Don E. Fehrenbacher rejected Cogdal's testimony, but he does not explain why his readers should now take stock in Cogdal's claims. Carwardine is comfortable using reminiscent materials, and that is admirable. But given the cyclical nature of the validity of reminiscences in Lincoln scholarship, a more thoughtful critique of such source material, at least in a footnote, would have been useful.

Those very minor criticisms aside, *Lincoln* is an excellent addition to Lincoln scholarship and should become a standard in Lincoln studies. A rare exception to the mythologizing treatments of Lincoln that run off printing presses each year, Carwardine's book addresses the significance of mass public political opinion and party politics in elevating Lincoln to a position of national authority. Lincoln was a man of great intellect and a masterful politician but, as Carwardine asserts, he derived much of his political power directly from the power of the historical circumstances in which he lived.

Notes

[1]. Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953); Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, eds., *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

[2]. William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life* (Chicago: Belford, Clarke & Co., 1889); Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

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Citation: Stacy Pratt McDermott. Review of Carwardine, Richard J., *Lincoln.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. December, 2003.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8608

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