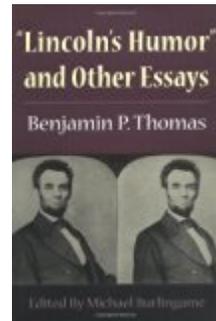


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Benjamin P. Thomas. *"Lincoln's Humor" and Other Essays*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002. xlix + 262 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02708-6.

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## Historicizing Lincoln's Biographer

There is a long tradition within Lincoln scholarship of consciously building upon the works of others and of recognizing the value of previous historians' work. *"Lincoln's Humor" and Other Essays* continues this tradition. Benjamin P. Thomas, author of *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* (1952), *Portrait for Posterity: Lincoln and His Biographers* (1947), and *Lincoln's New Salem* (1934), is to this day considered among the premier second-generation Lincoln biographers. Although over fifty years old, his biography of Lincoln is still judged by many as the best one-volume life of the sixteenth president.[1] Compiled and edited by Michael Burlingame, this collection includes two public addresses, three previously published essays, and eleven unpublished typescripts. This collection is valuable as a source for Thomas's unpublished writings on Abraham Lincoln, Edwin M. Stanton, and the other Lincoln biographers of Thomas's time; but its greatest value lies in the historiographical information it conveys about one of the great Lincoln scholars.

Michael Burlingame does a wonderful job of introducing Benjamin P. Thomas as a historian, a writer, and a person. He states, "Thomas succeeds better than any other biographer in portraying Lincoln as a three-dimensional, living, breathing figure" (p. xiii). Burlingame portrays Thomas and his work in that same human context that characterizes Thomas's own treatments of Lincoln. Thomas believed "we make a mistake in idolizing Lincoln—he was human, just as we are human; to maintain our kinship with him, we must keep him real" (p. xxxix). So too it is necessary to keep such an important literary figure as Benjamin P. Thomas real.

The topics in the unpublished essays included in this compilation vary from "Lincoln's Way with Words" to "Lincoln and the South." In reading these drafts and fragments, we can see the evolution of the ideas that complete Thomas's finished works. One who has never read *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* or *Lincoln's New Salem* would come away from this compilation with a clear understanding of many of Thomas's fundamental interpretations in those two works. Three different essays—"Lincoln's Way with Words," "Some Popular Misconceptions about Lincoln," and "Lincoln and New Salem"—repeat Thomas's certainty that the positive characteristics of life on the Illinois frontier molded Lincoln's character and provided him with his better traits and ideals.

In his introduction, Michael Burlingame notes that the essays in the book complement Thomas's *Life of Lincoln*, a statement that is supported by the title he chose for the collection. However, *"Lincoln's Humor" and Other Essays* is as much about Benjamin P. Thomas as an historian and a writer as it is about Abraham Lincoln. If the essays contained in this book had been chosen solely for the information they convey about Lincoln, the collection would make for a slow and repetitive read, for many of them are drafts of themes in his published writings. However, taken together, they illuminate Thomas's place in the historiography of Lincoln scholarship.

Similarly, Thomas's essays on Harry Edward Pratt, Ida M. Tarbell, and the other Lincoln biographers highlight the historiography of Lincoln scholarship that affected Thomas's writing. The work of these early his-

torians of Lincoln often gets overlooked today, in favor of more recent literature on the subject. However, in order to understand current scholarship, historians must always look back. Scholars today have benefited from and built upon Thomas's writing, just as he learned from the first generation of Lincoln historians and biographers. In these three chapters, Thomas explains how the works of Pratt, Tarbell, Nicolay and Hay, Lamon, and Herndon shaped his understanding of Lincoln.

The essays compiled in this volume, written between 1933 and 1956, highlight many of the advances in modern scholarship and also bring to light the changes that have taken place within the field of Lincoln studies. For example, in his essay entitled "Lincoln and the Courts," written in 1933, Thomas laments the obscure aspects of Lincoln's legal practice, and closes by saying, "it would be impracticable to make a special search in the archives of every county where he may have appeared" (p. 178). The Lincoln Legal Papers has now accomplished this task with the publication of the three DVD-ROM *Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition* in 2000. As a matter of fact, for the greatest part of his historical career, Benjamin P. Thomas did not have access to Roy P. Basler's *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, which was first published in 1953, three years before Thomas's death. Resources like these have changed the nature of historical scholarship. Remarks such as Thomas's remind us of the value of and need for continuing efforts to make primary documents accurately and readily accessible to historians.

Thomas's essays included in this compilation are valuable now more as historiography than as history. The standards expected of historical scholarship have changed so much that Thomas's lack of citations, use of reminiscences as definitive sources, and uncredited quotations lead the modern reader to question their authenticity. In "Lincoln's Humor," he quotes four of Lincoln's supposed favorite stories word-for-word, and each is credited as coming from a reminiscence, with the most contemporary written twenty years after Lincoln's death (p. 13). Today, a historian would not rely so completely upon reminiscences, at least not without qualifying their accuracy.

For the most part, "*Lincoln's Humor*" and *Other Essays* is an informative collection. However, the repetition and reworking of Thomas's ideas, which generate the arguments so salient throughout this work, also make for a somewhat tiresome read. Halfway through the third essay, the reader recognizes whole paragraphs that are

present in earlier essays. This repetition continues even more glaringly in the second section, most conspicuously in "Lincoln and New Salem," "Abe Lincoln, Country Lawyer," and "Lincoln and the Courts, 1854-1861." The tedious duplication of concepts calls into question, for the purposes of this compilation, the omission of some of the more fragmentary essays. Similarly, should Burlingame have included "Lincoln from 1847 to 1853"? It has already been published in *Lincoln, 1847-1853, Being the Day-by-Day Activities of Abraham Lincoln from January 1, 1847 to December 31, 1853*.<sup>[2]</sup> Perhaps since that publication was largely superseded by the publication of *Lincoln Day by Day* in 1960 without the essay, Burlingame deemed it obscure enough and important enough to merit inclusion here.<sup>[3]</sup> Nevertheless, one of the greatest values of "*Lincoln's Humor*" and *Other Essays* is the access it provides to unpublished works, and the inclusion of published materials detracts from the importance of those other essays.

The chief drawback of Michael Burlingame's edition of Benjamin P. Thomas's essays is the quality of its editing and annotation. Burlingame has edited or co-edited many other collections, including *Lincoln's Journalist: John Hay's Anonymous Writings for the Press, 1860-1864*, *An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay's Interviews and Essays*, *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay*, and *Lincoln Observed: The Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks*. The reader must know he is familiar with standards for transcription and editing; unfortunately, Dr. Burlingame neglects including any discussion of his editorial practice employed in "*Lincoln's Humor*" and *Other Essays*. Dr. Burlingame spent many weeks in the manuscripts department of the Illinois State Historical Library, which holds the Benjamin P. Thomas Papers. A brief perusal of these mostly typewritten essays revealed a dozen transcription errors and editorial corrections that were not noted. If the purpose of editing a volume of another's works is to preserve and present that author's individuality as a scholar, the transcriptions should be exact, and represent the idiosyncrasies of that author's writing. Burlingame fails to do this, by correcting Thomas's punctuation, spelling and colloquialisms, and by deleting or adding paragraph breaks. (Samples of these corrections occur on pages 28, 79, 80, 189, 191, and 207.)

Most of these omissions would not be noticed by the casual reader, or by anyone who did not have easy access to the Benjamin P. Thomas collection in the Illinois State Historical Library. Likewise, these sorts of corrections are admissible, as they in no way detract from the original

texts, and in most cases actually increase the readability of the essays. One only wonders why an experienced author and editor such as Michael Burlingame would have overlooked an explanation of these editorial insertions and corrections.

In his provenance notes, Burlingame also distinguishes between essays that are in “typescript” and “manuscript” form in the Benjamin P. Thomas Papers. However, the Thomas Collection contains few handwritten manuscripts; every essay Burlingame transcribed was typewritten. Burlingame’s distinction seems to have been made based upon the amount of handwritten corrections Thomas himself added to the typescripts, a rather arbitrary method of distinguishing between the two.

While this book claims to be a collection of “the best previously unpublished and uncollected writings on Abraham Lincoln,” its greatest value seems rather to be in its information about Benjamin P. Thomas and the

place his work holds in the history of Lincoln scholarship. Michael Burlingame’s introduction serves this purpose, and is an excellent resource for historiographical and biographical information on Thomas. As a tribute to one of the great Lincoln biographers, “*Lincoln’s Humor*” and *Other Essays* is satisfactory, though unfortunately marred somewhat by the editorial practices of its compiler.

#### Notes

[1]. Jonathan Yardley, “The Enigma behind the Icon,” *Washington Post Book World*, October 1, 1995, p. 3.

[2]. Harry E. Pratt, *Lincoln: Being the Day-by-Day Activities of Abraham Lincoln*, 4 vols. (Springfield: The Abraham Lincoln Association, 1941).

[3]. Earl Schenck Miers, ed., *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology*, 3 vols. (Washington: Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission).

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