

### Five Angles On Lincoln: A Statesman's Career Unfolds Through His Public Image

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## Review

### FIVE ANGLES ON LINCOLN

#### A statesman's career unfolds through his public image

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**Sullivan, George** *Picturing Lincoln: Famous Photographs That Popularized the President*. Clarion Books, 2000-10-01. ISBN 395916828

There have been several books about the Lincoln image designed for younger readers. **Picturing Lincoln** is the most recent, and also the best.

The author, George Sullivan, focuses on five photographs (of the more than 100 for which Lincoln sat), and demonstrates how they helped not only to popularize, but to define Abraham Lincoln during his lifetime and after his death. In presenting lively descriptions of the circumstances of each sitting, he manages as well to offer a brief biographical sketch of Lincoln's adult years, from his days as a congressman through his presidency and the Civil War. Sullivan's is a neat accomplishment.

The book begins with Alexander Hesler's famous tousled-haired photograph for which Lincoln posed in 1857, goes on to present the enormously influential Cooper Union photograph taken by Mathew Brady in 1860, and concludes with the three immortal camera studies that Alexander Gardner made in Washington in 1864: the penny profile, the so-called five-dollar-bill image, and the picture of Lincoln reading a book to his son Tad.

All are seminal Lincoln images, Sullivan asserts, because they were popular in their own time and in their original formats, and also because they inspired engravers, lithographers, sheet music publishers, cartoonists, campaign button-manufacturers, and even sculptors, to copy and adapt the pictures into different media. The results became display pieces in the homes of Lincoln admirers throughout the country, and vivified his evolving image as Honest Abe, the Great Emancipator, and the nation's martyr.

These themes have been amply covered before (my co-authors Mark E. Neely, Jr. and Gabor Boritt, for example, wrote *The Lincoln Image* [Scribner's] 17 years ago). But Sullivan's book is made impressive by the fine selection of illustrations, the crisp writing, and the thoughtful picture captions that nicely demonstrate the ways in which clever artists copied, retouched, improved, and disguised period photographs.

Sullivan's cogent, never patronizing style is aimed at younger audiences, but wisely assumes that in this age of widespread access to computer graphics, his readers are familiar with the techniques of massaging visual imagery.

The book would have been even more impressive had the author relied on (and more routinely cited) scholarly sources, and less often recycled dubious tales from popular histories like James D. Horan's 45-year-old biography of Mathew Brady (*Mathew Brady: Historian with a Camera*, Crown, 1955), which perpetuate unsubstantiated anecdotes about Lincoln's experiences before the cameras. And future editions of the book might take care to correct the illustration of A.B. Walter's famous Lincoln family engraving on page 58 (it appears flopped) and to revise the credit to the Lincoln Museum of Fort Wayne's Cindy VanHorn, who is incorrectly listed in the acknowledgment as an employee of Ford's Theatre.

But these are quibbles. **Picturing Lincoln** offers a fine introduction to Lincoln iconography, and its author and publisher deserve much praise for the result. This book is highly recommended for young readers.

*Harold Holzer has co-authored six of his 18 books on Lincoln and Civil War art, printmaking, and photography. He is a member of the U.S. Lincoln Bicentennial Commission and vice chairman of The Lincoln Forum.*