

### Honest Abe ?: Biography Examines Lincoln's Ethics

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## Review

### HONEST ABE ?

#### Biography examines Lincoln's ethics

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**Miller, William Lee** *Lincoln's Virtues*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$30.00 ISBN 037540158X

How was it that a man born to the most grueling poverty on the remote western prairie, lacking in formal education--merely the son of "a wandering laboring boy," in his own words, and early in life, little better himself--rose from obscurity to the American presidency, and from there to immortality? The mystery of Abraham Lincoln's astonishing ascent has captivated hundreds of biographers, and millions of readers, and yet has stubbornly eluded definitive explanation.

Now comes William Lee Miller's "ethical biography," offering as engrossing and intriguing an explanation for Lincoln's emergence as I have read in years, in a book full of wisdom, insight, and charm. Lincoln was "not born, after all, on Mount Rushmore," the author declares, even though he makes absolutely clear that he believes he belongs there.

Then how to explain his success? Miller insists that Lincoln triumphed not only because he was "able" or "affable," although he was certainly both, nor because he had the good fortune to be born white and male, rather than black and female, which severely limited opportunity in 19th-century America, nor because he was lucky enough to grow up here, not in Africa or South America. Nor can we attribute his success to a loving stepmother who encouraged him, or an unquenchable thirst for reading: the Bible, Shakespeare, Euclid, the law, and of course, newspapers. Other children in other villages had similar upbringings and similar ambitions.

To Miller, "an ethical biography presupposes the freedom of the subject, within some limits, to choose different courses of action. It assumes that he can,

by a sequence of choices, shape abiding patterns of conduct--virtues."

And these, Miller points out, Lincoln chose in abundance. For example, in a frontier milieu in which animal rights activism was unimaginable, Lincoln disliked hunting, made it a point to stop killing animals as soon as he could, and even as a youth rebuked his cruel friends when they placed hot coals on turtles' shells for sport. And yet he became popular among his peers.

Most of those peers drank, swore, smoked, whored, went regularly to church, and resigned themselves to working their unyielding land forever. Lincoln eschewed liquor, watched his language (except when relating ribald stories), disliked tobacco, respected (and usually struck out with) girls, never joined a church, and hated farm work with a passion. "This man," Miller reminds us, "was, not, spiritually speaking, a rail-splitter." Rather, he was an irresistible original, blessed with extraordinary gifts, enormously appealing despite his gauche homeliness, but just as important, grounded by solid moral purpose.

In a deeply racist society, Lincoln was early and routinely "cordial" to the few blacks he knew. He was neither a Nativist nor an Indian-hater--also rare. Although stronger than most contemporaries, he was never a bully. While most of his class, not to mention most of his own family, became Jacksonian Democrats, he became a Whig. He dreamed not of the agrarian ideal, but of internal improvements and opportunity in the city.

Miller's anomalous Lincoln is simply not like most men of his time and environment. He was not a backwoodsman who wanted to stay in the backwoods, a raftsmen who fell in love with the river, a farmer who wanted to stay on the farm, a penniless boy who expected to stay penniless, and certainly not an uneducated boy who expected to stay uneducated. He was not a small town lad who loved the small town and wanted to stay there. . . ." Neither nature nor nurture could fully explain him.

What he was, argues the author, was a relentlessly diligent man of extraordinary "moral self-confidence." He developed a compelling ethical rationale for his politics and his life, and, even though he matured greatly as a thinker, writer, and leader, never wavered from his own first principles. Notwithstanding recent arguments to the contrary by revisionists like Lerone Bennett Jr., Miller convincingly points out that though he was a viable mainstream politician in what was arguably the most racially retrograde of any

northern state, Lincoln insisted bravely, early, and consistently that slavery was a moral evil, and that blacks were human beings who had a natural right to eat the bread they earned with their own hands. This alone set him apart.

Miller readily concedes that Lincoln was also a pragmatist. He did abandon his "beau ideal," Henry Clay, in 1848, to support Zachary Taylor for the Whig presidential nomination because he thought only Taylor could win the general election. He was also resigned to taking small political steps in pursuit of large moral goals. Miller's Lincoln was decidedly not an unattached moral philosopher, examining with Olympian objectivity the great question of principles versus consequences in making moral choices." Rather, he was "a thoroughly engaged" professional who dedicated himself especially after the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska act "aroused" him back into public life--to fighting the spread of slavery even if he could only do so, to paraphrase his own description of his education, "by littles."

Miller's Lincoln adroitly combined "moral clarity" and the "'responsibility' of a worthy politician." He was "in an admirable way, a combination of the prophet with the 'prudence,'" an exemplar of morality without moralism. He functioned not "simply as a coalition-building political manager," but as one who simultaneously kept "the central moral principle clear. . . ."

So Miller frames his penetrating analysis of Lincoln's private and public life from the backwoods of Kentucky to the presidency. The emphasis is on Lincoln's earlier years, and Miller revisits and reanalyzes them with a bravura mastery of the sources and a beguiling writing style. In early chapters, it radiates down-home folksiness, occasionally speaking directly to the reader with personal asides like "that is the way it always is, is it not?" and "if you think about it." His Lincoln is a "tip-top" orator who might be inspiring one day, "goofy" the next. On one occasion, Miller dismisses a particularly irksome preconception by declaring: "Ha!" In less capable hands, such archaic constructions would seem ludicrous. Somehow, Miller carries it off. His style suits the man he describes: it is rigorously serious at the same time it is slyly humorous.

Besides, as Lincoln's public utterances grow more profound, so cleverly does the density of the author's prose. Miller's analyses of Lincoln's Lyceum Speech (surely Miller is the first ever to compare it to the Billie Holiday song, "Strange Fruit!"), his Peoria Speech, his debates with Douglas, and his other pre-presidential masterpieces, prove original and riveting.

Miller concludes by suggesting that Lincoln won the White House thanks to a torrent of confluent breaks: "geography, skill, luck, and acceptable ideological placement." But he hastens to add that these alone do "not reflect anything extraordinary about the candidate." What set Lincoln apart was "the quality of his public argument." Here, Miller argues, "was the essential ingredient in Lincoln's rise."

Miller has provided new readers and old Lincoln hands alike with a fresh and inspiriting new portrait, not to mention a daring challenge to the leaders and voters of modern America. Behold this man Lincoln. Appreciate him without cynicism. Emulate him. And duplicate him if you can.

In the end, perhaps the only thing wrong with this book is that it ends. If ever a volume cried out for a sequel, this one does. The Civil War years await Miller's analysis. If he resists, he will disappoint as many readers as he will delight with this triumph.

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