

### Lincoln and Whitman: Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington

Michael F. Bishop

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## Review

**Bishop, Michael F.**

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**Epstein, Daniel Mark** *Lincoln and Whitman: Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington*. Ballantine Books, \$24.95 ISBN 345457994

Statesman and poet

Civil War visionaries of politics and thought

Nineteenth-century visitors to Washington, D.C., recorded countless bleak descriptions of a provincial, Southern village, a ragged collection of boarding houses punctuated by incongruous marble temples squatting heavily in the mud. The capital of a slave republic, Washington before the Civil War teemed with markets devoted to the selling of human flesh. In the midst of L'Enfant's broad avenues was a pestilential canal, passing just south of the Executive Mansion and driving a succession of presidents to seek healthier climes in the summer. The transient population, especially the members of the political class, depended on the president's hospitality to provide the semblance of society. Of culture, there was little to be found, outside of the vaguely disreputable theaters, one of which would be the scene of unimaginable horror on a cool April night.

It is remarkable, then, that striding through that cultural backwater were two of the greatest literary figures in American history. **Lincoln and Whitman**, by Daniel Mark Epstein, is a vivid portrait of two political poets whose words have shaped our memory of the Civil War.

Walt Whitman was already a poet of some renown when the nation tore itself asunder, and the author of *Leaves of Grass* was pulled irresistibly to the wartime capital. Moved to play a role in the momentous conflict, Whitman spent most of his time tending to the countless wounded men who filled the makeshift hospitals all over the city. He supported himself mainly through a succession of undemanding government posts that left him plenty of time to care for his beloved soldiers. Epstein sensitively describes Whitman's tender interactions with the soldiers, and the physical and psychological price paid by the poet for

his ministry.

During his time in Washington, the poet often encountered the president. I see the President almost every day, as I happen to live where he passes to or from his lodgings out of town, wrote Whitman in 1863. Thus developed the odd, but respectful, acquaintance between the two. We have got so that we always exchange bows, and very cordial ones. For all that, the two never had a conversation, even though Whitman once found himself in the White House asking a favor of John Hay, with the president scant feet away. The poet seemed unwilling to impose upon the harried commander-in-chief, but observed him closely enough to leave a portrait of Lincoln in words: I think well of the President. He has a face like a Hoosier Michelangelo, so awful ugly it becomes beautiful, with its strange mouth, its deep cut criss-cross lines, and its doughnut complexion. Whitman would soar from earthiness to eloquence in his heartbreaking tribute to the martyred president, *When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd*.

Subtitle notwithstanding, Epstein's story opens in Springfield and the book features vivid descriptions of New York City and detailed maps of both Manhattan and Washington. During the war, Whitman would occasionally return home to Brooklyn, visiting with his troubled family and rejoining the literary set for drinks in Manhattan. It is the federal city, however, that serves as the principal stage for his protagonists. Epstein grew up in downtown Washington, in the same neighborhood in which Whitman lived and Lincoln often visited. Readers inspired to walk these same streets will be delighted to find a vibrant neighborhood of restaurants, hotels, museums, and luxurious apartments, rescued from years of decay by investment and wise planning.

It is perhaps inevitable that Whitman shines forth from these pages more vividly than does Lincoln; the New Yorker was a prolific diarist and letter-writer, and poured his feelings onto the page. Lincoln, though given to bursts of humor and laughter, was far more reserved, and kept no journal. Epstein, like all Lincoln biographers, must rely on the testimony of others for insight into Lincoln's character. We, like Whitman and his other contemporaries, can only circle around him, curious and probing, but from a distance.

The author succeeds admirably in his portrayal of literary genius, and his evocations of wartime Washington rival those of Margaret Leech. If he overstates the influence of *Leaves of Grass* on the writings of the mature

Lincoln, he successfully demonstrates that Lincoln and Whitman were united by a mystical devotion to Union.

Epstein is himself a poet, and the biographer of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Aimee Semple McPherson, and Nat King Cole. He writes with a quiet, lyrical grace too rarely found in books about Lincoln. We may never understand the mysterious alchemy that fused the hardscrabble frontier, Shakespeare, and the King James Bible into Lincoln's deathless prose. But Epstein's study of Lincoln and Whitman brings to life two very different men whose writing still sings from the page.

*Michael F. Bishop is executive director of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission.*