

We Are Lincoln Men: Abraham Lincoln and His Friends

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Recommended Citation

Pederson, William D. (2004) "We Are Lincoln Men: Abraham Lincoln and His Friends," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss3/36>

Review

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Summer 2004

Donald, David *We Are Lincoln Men: Abraham Lincoln and His Friends*. Simon & Schuster, \$25.00 ISBN 743254686

Executive relationships

Scholar Applies Aristotelian Framework

Measuring against Aristotle's three levels of friendship—enjoyable friendships, useful friendships, and perfect (or complete friendships)—author David Herbert Donald evaluates the relationships between America's 16th president and six male friends. The book presents comparative case studies of the friendship Lincoln had with each of the six: Joshua Speed, William H. Herndon, Orville H. Browning, William H. Seward, John G. Nicolay, and John Hay. Donald, the Charles Warren Professor of American History and of American Civilization Emeritus at Harvard University, has won two Pulitzer Prizes. He has also published some of the best essays ever written about Abraham Lincoln. It's especially impressive to have an established historian acknowledge how his views have evolved over time. Donald brings to this work his exceptional knowledge of Lincoln.

Even the casual reader will enjoy these separate case studies of how six very different individuals interacted with Lincoln. Almost everyone will find new information about both Lincoln and the six men examined in the case studies.

Ultimately the value of this book may be that it addresses the question that he encountered most frequently on his 1995-96 promotional tour of *Lincoln*: was America's 16th president gay? Donald had the opportunity to read sections from the manuscript, *Yours Forever*, by late psychologist C. A. Tripp, in which Tripp concludes that Lincoln was gay. Similarly, gay activist and playwright Larry Kramer also has asserted the same conclusion and claims to have documentary proof, which has never been provided. The best evidence to refute these claims is found in Donald's latest work. The author thoroughly disagrees with Tripp's

conclusions and he does a good job of putting Lincoln's male friendships into a context that will allow readers to form their own opinions.

The most disappointing dimension of the book is Donald's application of the Aristotelian framework to Lincoln's friendships. He seems to have misunderstood that Aristotle's distinction between the most desirable category and the other two levels of friendship is based primarily on the dimension of equality rather than on intimacy. He compounds this error by subjectively removing women from even being considered among Lincoln's friends by claiming gender difference alone colors a relationship so that is basically different from that of friends. If Aristotle's thesis that equality is what makes for the best kind of friendship is used, one is better able to see that Lincoln treated virtually everyone on that basis. It is the essential reason why so many people enjoyed talking to him and why he enjoyed them also. In the six case studies that Donald presents, there is that dimension, at least until some of the friends reduced the friendship to only a utilitarian relationship.

It may be valid, as Donald states in the Afterward, that Dwight Eisenhower and his brother, Milton, as well as John F. Kennedy and his brother, Robert, enjoyed relationships of a type denied to Abraham Lincoln. But surely, he found dimensions of that kind of fraternal relationship in those around him, even among those in the six case studies. In the case of Harry Truman, his complete friendship was with wife Bess. Truman's practical insight on friendship—if you need a friend in politics, you need to get a dog—probably reflects reality in the White House. The Lincolns, by the way, had a dog.

Despite the shortcomings cited, this is an enjoyable read that deserves a place on every Lincoln shelf. You will find yourself pondering what you read.

William D. Pederson is the American Studies Endowed Chair and Director of the International Lincoln Center at Louisiana State University in Shreveport. His most recent books are Franklin D. Roosevelt (M.E. Sharpe, 2004), Leaders of the Pack (Peter Lang, 2003), and Franklin D. Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln (M.E. Sharpe, 2003). He can be reached at wpederso@pilot.lsus.edu.