

### A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Lincoln and His Word

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## Review

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**Miller, Richard Lawrence** *A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Lincoln and His Word*.  
McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, \$45.00 ISBN 978-0-7864-5928-5

### Examining Lincoln in His Own Perspective

This, the third volume in Richard Lawrence Miller's *Lincoln and His World* series, represents the interest in Abraham Lincoln's personal life. As a study of the pre-presidential years, it is the author's view on the growth and evolution of Abraham Lincoln.\*

The author's quest is in his preface,

Anyone who seeks to understand Lincoln's White House years is unlikely to achieve that goal without knowing what Lincoln was doing in the half century before he became president. Decades of experience shaped his response to Civil War challenges, and thereby *Lincoln and His World* contributes to [the] understanding of his presidency by illuminating his climb to that pinnacle. (1).

Early biographers of Abraham Lincoln including James G. Randall in 1936 have focused mainly on the public life y examining his political career and his presidential administration. But Randall was a product of his time and never concentrated on such topics as Lincoln's relationships with women, his melancholia and his troubled domestic life. This gives us important lessons about Lincoln.

Major biographies such as David Donald's *Lincoln* (1995) illustrate that, as only about three percent of his text deals with the pre-Illinois legislative years of Lincoln. Similar minimal attention appears in earlier biographies by Benjamin Thomas (1951) and Stephen Oates (1977). Richard Carwardine (2007) covers this period in just two of more than three hundred pages. The exception is

William Herndon and Jesse Weik's *Life of Lincoln* published in the late 1880s which relied extensively on interviews that Herndon had conducted in Indiana and Illinois shortly after Abraham Lincoln's death.

Sources potentially important for their Lincoln-related material are not always greeted warmly. The first two volumes of Richard Lawrence Miller's *Lincoln and His World* (2006, 2008) contain a mass of new Lincoln data, including Lincoln's entry into politics before becoming a lawyer. He excelled in both fields and, as such, Miller examines his rise to leadership. This information, while not new, is largely unrecognized. Miller's survey of Illinois newspapers for all three of his volumes is immense. Miller has also searched the political handbill collection in the Illinois State Historical Society which has remained largely overlooked until now.

Miller's first two large volumes have received mixed reviews – perhaps because he has, heretofore, not been considered a member of the Lincoln academy. Miller documents Lincoln's political world in all three volumes. It is all encompassing with a Charles Dickens cast of characters, small-time political work and rivalry, partisanship that would make Tea Party members blush, and (of course) the worse kind of race baiting. All of this is a valuable contribution to understanding Abraham Lincoln. Paul Simon's excellent account of Lincoln's years in the Illinois legislature (*Lincoln's Preparation for Greatness: The Illinois Legislative Years* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1965) takes on added luster with Miller's contributions.

All of Richard Lawrence Miller's volumes provide additional information in the notes. This does give the reader a sense of Miller's thoughts on the sources he cites.

The scope of Miller's project thus far– from 1809 to 1853– does reconstruct “the hidden world of Abraham Lincoln” by sifting through “a mass of verbal chunks left by Lincoln and persons around him” (xi).

As Miller said in his first volume covering 1809 through 1834, “I offer a very personal portrait of what Lincoln was all about . . . . I present a world, not a point of view and not a drama” (xi). Miller spends most of his time on this Lincoln in the context of American culture at the time. There is narrative here with character development as he creates this mostly through the memories of those surrounding Lincoln. The author possesses great courage by continually

offering opinions.

Volume 3 is organized chronologically: The first two chapters (1843 and 1844) discuss Lincoln's failed pursuit for a congressional seat; finally in 1845 Lincoln maneuvers towards a seat in Congress winning, in chapter 4, – "1846 - Victory at Last." Lincoln's political rise continues in 1847 and 1848 in chapters 4 and 5, respectively, with his attendance at the 30th Congress, First Session and his attacks on President Polk and the need for the war with Mexico. In chapter 7, "1848," Lincoln does his best to insure the victory for Whig presidential candidate Zachary Taylor by campaigning for him in Illinois and Massachusetts. Chapter 8 ("1848-1849"), shows Lincoln serving in the Second Session of this Congress.

His only term in Congress ends and Lincoln is forced, yet again, to deal with slavery in chapter 9, "1850." For chapters 10, 11, and 12, Lincoln practices law and contends with the slavery issue while he practices law and politics. The book ends on the cusp of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise with Lincoln's political nemesis, Stephen A. Douglas, ushering through the Kansas-Nebraska Act, causing Lincoln's major re-engagement in politics.

Not everyone will be enamored with Volume 3, *The Rise to National Prominence 1843-1853*. Some will object to Miller's use of sources as too plentiful and eccentric. Yet, they are helpful in understanding the man. *Lincoln and His World is sui generis* and goes hand-in-hand with Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis's *Herndon's Informants*.

Miller's book has great value and is distinctive because it contributes to the Lincoln literature and sets this biography apart by offering new material with new perspectives. Those who do not like this book – just wait – there are always new Lincoln books in store. All in all, we should be grateful Miller has chosen to be so inclusive as this is a robust, exceedingly rich menu with something for every taste.

*Frank J. Williams is founding Chair of The Lincoln Forum and co-author, with Harold Holzer and Edna Green Medford, of The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views-Social, Political, and Iconographic, and serves as contributing columnist for the Civil War Sesquicentennial, Civil War Book Review.*

**\* In an effort at full disclosure, Michael Burkheimer and I are co-editors of a book of essays about Mary Lincoln scheduled to be published in 2012. This author is one of the contributors to that book. I have never met Mr. Miller and his chapter for the forthcoming book is unrelated to his book being reviewed.**