

Emancipating Lincoln: The Proclamation in Text, Context, and Memory

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Review

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Holzer, Harold *Emancipating Lincoln: The Proclamation in Text, Context, and Memory*. Harvard University Press, \$24.95 ISBN 978-0-674-06440-9

Putting Emancipation into Perspective

This volume gathers expanded versions of the Nathan I. Huggins lectures delivered in October 2010 by Harold Holzer. The title of the book has a double meaning: it refers to Lincoln's actions as emancipator and seeks to emancipate Lincoln from the judgments of posterity that have tended, especially in the later twentieth century, to cast aspersions upon the President and Proclamation. In three lively chapters, Holzer examines the ways in which Lincoln prepared the public for the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, probes the contours of the written document, and studies representations of emancipation in American iconography.

Holzer begins with "The Bow of Promise," a phrase coined by Frederick Douglass. He examines closely the period between July 22, 1862, when Lincoln first announced to his cabinet his intentions to issue an Emancipation Proclamation, and September 22, 1862, when he followed through and signed the preliminary decree. Holzer carefully traces the ever enlarging circle of politicians, editors, and friends who knew what was coming. They did so, he argues, because Lincoln intentionally sought to manipulate public opinion. "However primitive what we might call today the era's 'media platforms,'" Holzer insists, "Lincoln certainly knew the terrain and how to dominate it" (17).

Lincoln must have enjoyed the gamesmanship, hinting to friends (a letter to Reverdy Johnson), feinting in one direction while planning to go in another (his response to Horace Greeley), speaking harshly about the place of blacks in America so as to appease northern opponents (a meeting with a "Deputation of Free Negroes"). Although Holzer adds to the list of confidants those who recalled only years later being informed by the President (for example, most

historians, including Holzer it would seem, discount Hannibal Hamlin's claim of being the first to whom Lincoln showed the Proclamation, but then Holzer inexplicably finds "an element of truth" in the account), he offers an insightful and penetrating analysis of a critical and often overlooked period in the history of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Holzer's second chapter, "Emancipator versus Pettifogger," ranges widely in trying to come to terms with the bland, legalistic language of the Emancipation Proclamation. Holzer's conclusion, "Lincoln wanted not a proclamation that would please literary critics but one that would survive challenges in the courts; not a declaration that would enthrall the enslaved but one that would seal the cooperation of the free," fits well with what has become the standard interpretation of the document as written text (99-100). Most important, he returns the Proclamation to the past by narrating the myriad ways in which it was revered at the time. Evoking Lincoln's Annual Message of 1862, Holzer invites us to "disenthral ourselves" from viewing the Proclamation "from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, from which perspective we cannot help concluding only that it was delayed, cold, insincere, halfhearted, and uninspiring" (125).

In "Sacred Effigies," the final chapter, Holzer returns to the visual history of the Emancipation Proclamation. No one knows more about these images or has done more to make lithographs, engravings, paintings, sculptures, and other artistic expressions central to our understanding of Lincoln and emancipation. Here, Holzer ranges beyond his seminal work in *The Lincoln Image* (co-authored with Gabor S. Boritt and Mark E. Neely, Jr.) and his authoritative essay "Picturing Freedom: The Emancipation Proclamation in Art, Iconography, and Memory"). In keeping with the book's theme of not imposing current sensibilities upon the past, he argues that the image of the kneeling slave being raised by Lincoln's outstretched hands was viewed as radical at the time, though Frederick Douglass murmured at the unveiling of Thomas Ball's Emancipation Memorial in 1876 that it "showed the Negro on his knees when a more manly attitude would have been indicative of freedom."

Holzer's forays into late nineteenth and twentieth-century iconography are especially welcome. He discusses such images as a bronze relief from 1894 that shows Lincoln handing a rifle to a kneeling black soldier, and the mid-twentieth-century work of African-American artists William H. Johnson and Horace Pippin. Holzer mentions briefly some recent work; for example

Emancipation Approximation, a series of twenty-six prints in the style of silhouette cutouts by Kara Walker, an African-American artist born in 1969. Twenty-first-century visual representations are beginning to draw the attention of scholars (see the essays by Elizabeth Young and W. Fitzhugh Brundage in Thomas J. Brown, editor, *Remixing the Civil War*); Holzer's groundbreaking work on nineteenth- and twentieth-century images will serve as a foundation for all future studies of artistic representation of Lincoln and emancipation.

With the sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation nearly upon us, *Emancipating Lincoln* serves as an excellent introduction to the interpretive challenges posed by the document and its place in history.

Louis P. Masur, Professor of American Studies and History at Rutgers University, is the author of The Civil War: A Concise History (2011) and Lincoln's Hundred Days: The Emancipation Proclamation and the War for the Union (2012).