

Lincoln's Boys: John Hay, John Nicolay, and the War for Lincoln's Image

Martin Johnson

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Martin (2014) "Lincoln's Boys: John Hay, John Nicolay, and the War for Lincoln's Image," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.2.13

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss2/12>

Review

Johnson, Martin

Spring 2014

Zeitz, Joshua *Lincoln's Boys: John Hay, John Nicolay, and the War for Lincoln's Image*. Viking, \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-670-02566-4

The Story of Lincoln's Confidants

Lincoln's Boys presents a paired biography of Abraham Lincoln's wartime secretaries, John Nicolay and John Hay, arguing clearly and compellingly that their story is essential for understanding both the Civil War and the evolving image of Lincoln in the American mind. The brilliant and complex John Hay sometimes steals the show, but the more phlegmatic Nicolay is revealed as an intelligent and diligent partner in their collaborative molding of Lincoln's legacy.

Zeitz is well suited to telling the tale. An academically-trained historian, he is the author of *Flapper: A Madcap Story of Sex, Style, Celebrity, and the Women who made Modern America* (2006) and *White Ethnic New York: Jews, Catholics, and the Shaping of Postwar Politics* (2007), but he is also a political professional who has worked on a number of campaigns and even run for a seat in the U. S. House. Founded upon excellent research in the archives, *Lincoln's Boys* is also broadly framed and accessible.

The book unfolds chronologically, shuttling between the two central players as they negotiate the decades leading up to and after the war. Nicolay, born in Germany but reared in Illinois, and Hay, who was born in Illinois but seemed always destined for bigger things, first became friends in Springfield in the late 1850s. A journalist, Nicolay became Lincoln's secretary shortly after his nomination, while Hay, who had found law less than enticing, joined the team shortly thereafter. Zeitz deftly follows the pair to the White House, moving rapidly through the years as they witness virtually every important event of the Lincoln presidency. Much of this material has been mined before, notably by David H. Donald in *We are Lincoln Men* (2003) and in the many edited volumes by Michael Burlingame collecting the writings of Hay and Nicolay, but Zeitz is a

careful and expert guide through the war years.

With the death of Lincoln and the end of the war, the story of Hay and Nicolay naturally loses some cohesion. Hay developed into an important literary and, somewhat later, political figure, while Nicolay took up a sinecure civil service post and devoted his life to Lincoln's memory. For long years, the two men had mainly an epistolary relationship, but their respect and admiration for each other, sealed during the war years, remained a constant force in their diverging lives. In 1874 their collaboration was renewed again, however, when they gained access to Lincoln's papers, held until then by Robert Todd Lincoln, and they set about writing a long-projected life of their mentor and friend.

The planning, research, writing, and reception of the ten-volume *Abraham Lincoln: A History* is the focus of the last hundred pages of *Lincoln's Boys*. Given his control over the Lincoln papers, Robert had, as Hay put it, "plenary blue pen powers" over the Lincoln portrayed by Hay and Nicolay. Robert used them especially to brighten the image of Lincoln's father Thomas, who Hay originally described as "idle, roving, inefficient." Insightfully, Zeitz notes this intervention was not outside the norms for historical writing of the time, and then goes on to detail the tireless labors of Hay and Nicolay in compiling their enormous history, which took them the better part of fifteen years. Zeitz shows that, against the backdrop of reconciliationist amnesia and Lost Cause mythologizing, *Abraham Lincoln: A History* set out to forthrightly support and trumpet the cause of the Union and of Lincoln, though Hay and Nicolay saw their work as documenting the truth rather than making a case.

That case was complicated by the pressures of the marketplace, as their publisher, Richard Watson Gilder of *Century Magazine*, felt compelled to remind them several times that their work had to appeal to a national, and not just northern, public. Hay and Nicolay sometimes acceded to these requests, but only reluctantly. "We deny that it is partisanship to use the multiplication table, reverence the Decalogue, or obey the Constitution of the United States," Nicolay retorted to one of Gilder's letters. Zeitz then provides perhaps the most extensive, and illuminating, reading of the *History* yet written, treating it as a serious work of history, a document deeply rooted in its time, and an important chapter in the historiography and memory of the era. Hay and Nicolay helped create what Zeitz calls "the Lincoln Memorial Lincoln," a project Zeitz recognizes as both problematic and admirable.

After the publication of the *History* the two men once again grew somewhat apart, Hay engaged ever more deeply in politics and diplomacy, Nicolay continuing to labor "in Lincoln's shadow." A few quick pages pass rapidly over Nicolay's death in 1901 and Hay's tenure as Secretary of State, and the book ends somewhat abruptly without a comprehensive conclusion that can help pick out the milestones of the road just travelled. Zeitz has given us an engaging dual biography of two of the most central players in both the Lincoln life and legacy in a book that can be read with pleasure by all, while the chapters on *Abraham Lincoln: A History* and its legacy will be particularly appreciated as a powerful contribution to our understanding of the memory of Lincoln and the Civil War. "Americans today understand Abraham Lincoln much as Nicolay and Hay hoped that they would," Zeitz argues, and we are indebted to him for showing us how much that was the work of Lincoln's boys.

Martin Johnson is an Assistant Professor of History at Miami University-Hamilton.