

### Abraham Lincoln: The Observations of John G. Nicolay and John Hay

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## Review

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**Burlingame, Michael, ed.** *Abraham Lincoln: The Observations of John G. Nicolay and John Hay*. Southern Illinois University Press, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 9780809327386

### Lincoln According to his Secretaries

In this slim collection a distinguished editor and biographer presents eleven brief excerpts from the ten-volume *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, by his devoted secretaries John G. Nicolay and John Hay. The introduction, Nicolay and Hay: Court Historians, appeared in the Winter 1998 *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*. Readers of that masterful summary may have no need of this book. Burlingame displays his usual sensitivity to male relationships, comparing the affection between Lincoln and Hay to that between George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, though he errs in making Hay, an Ivy League snob, nineteen years younger than his boss; he was actually the junior by twenty-nine years. Non-specialists are apt to be misled by much of the content of the fewer than 65 pages Burlingame has cherry picked from the mammoth biography. Partly serialized in the *Century Magazine*, 1886-1890, and published as books in the latter year, few today, even among Lincoln specialists, have read the entire 4,709 pages. Scholarly assessments changed almost completely from the late 1880s, when James Ford Rhodes praised it, to 1939 when Allan Nevins condemned it. Burlingame argues that Carl Sandburg could not have begun his own life without it. Other biographers had to rely on it until the opening of the Lincoln papers in 1947, followed two years later by the publication of Hay's diary and Nicolay's memos of presidential conversations. Now, except for hardcore Lincoln idolaters, including the current clique of court historians, most readers will find even the brief excerpts from this panegyric hard to stomach. The contrast between Burlingame's scholarship and Nicolay and Hay's hagiography is often jarring.

The selections come from volumes three, four, five, six, and ten. All but one of the chapters focus on the first two years of Lincoln's presidency, including the election aftermath and cabinet selections, the Sumter crisis, patronage distribution, the beleaguered capital in 1861, Bull Run, Lincoln's relations with George B. McClellan and his subsequent removal, and the 1862 cabinet crisis. A final chapter summarizes Nicolay and Hay's assessment of Lincoln's fame two decades after his death. They elevated their martyred president above all other mortals, partly because the blood of Virginia planters ran in his veins, a myth long since demolished.

Robert Todd Lincoln, the president's only surviving son, had complete power to excise from the manuscript anything objectionable. He criticized the original description of Thomas Lincoln, the president's hard luck father, demanding a more favorable cameo. Robert Lincoln's complaints about innumerable passages caused the authors considerable difficulty. In satisfying their patron, who controlled access to his father's papers, Nicolay and Hay destroyed much of the potential value of their work after decades of labor.

Yet there are gems to be found even in this brief distillation. On November 6, 1860, the day of the presidential election, an angry resident who felt that he had been libeled caned an editor in Springfield. Some current nineteenth-century historians think that such random violence occurred only in the benighted South. Lincoln called our national elections big boils but grabbed the largest brass ring of all. Then the embattled president compared the office seekers who swarmed the White House daily to the last biting flies of autumn. Since Lincoln had long been just such an office seeker, usually a disappointed one, his complaint rings false. Either the job offered was one that he (or his wife Mary) did not want; or the job he wanted went to someone else. It strains credulity to read of Lincoln's shock that he could not rely on his cabinet for sound advice about appointments, since they all had their own lists of personal favorites. Partly because of this ordeal, Lincoln developed the germ of an idea for what would later be the civil service.

The editorial comment in each chapter that precedes the selection from Nicolay and Hay is often longer, and nearly always more valuable, than the excerpt itself. But there are far too many omissions, errors, and skewed interpretations by the two secretaries for even Burlingame, with his encyclopedic knowledge of Lincoln, to correct them all. The two acolytes were clearly wrong about countless matters as shown by scholarship since World War II. One

notable example on pages 26-27 is Lincoln's cabinet, which in weaker hands . . . would have been a hot-bed of strife; under him it became a tower of strength. That is why he rarely consulted it before making important decisions, a complaint made by men as different as Gideon Welles and Salmon P. Chase. Nicolay and Hay's own narrative betrays them. They rightly damn the mendacious Chase, but also the incompetent, ethically challenged Simon Cameron (80). Supporters like Seward and Welles (whose selection as Navy secretary was later than Burlingame thinks) are relegated to minor roles, and a number of others are barely mentioned. That was the case even with Mary Lincoln. Today biographers feel obliged to treat this sad, troubled woman in tiresome detail. For gendered reasons some even make her into a co-presidential precursor of such feminist icons as Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Of Lincoln, Burlingame claims that There was never a closer calculator of political probabilities than himself. He was completely at home among election figures (24). Later he notes Lincoln's mastery of Illinois politics, but does not give him sufficient credit for the political genius and cunning that he demonstrated at the national level, more akin to that of Karl Rove or James Carville than that of most presidents. For example, Burlingame downplays the political timing of Lincoln's second firing of McClellan, which matched his removal of Benjamin Butler after his reelection in 1864. The editor is better at noting Nicolay and Hay's flagrant bias against Chase, McClellan, and all Confederates, such as John B. Magruder, who gets a thorough drubbing, but probably helped the Union cause by resigning his commission. Burlingame does not do as well correcting the multiple but inaccurate plaudits by Nicolay and Hay of such third raters as Irwin McDowell. Yet he clearly knows the Civil War almost as well as he does Lincoln, quoting Montgomery Meigs on the loser at Bull Run as a good, brave, commonplace fat man.' (75).

A chapter by chapter comparison of each of the eleven excerpts with Nicolay and Hay's original text reveals some questionable items that readers will miss since there is no note on editorial method. Burlingame on at least ten occasions has combined two paragraphs from the biography into one, or split a single original paragraph into two. There is no clear logic behind these changes. Long paragraphs are left untouched; shorter ones are split; still others are combined into quite lengthy passages. This is not a facsimile edition, and such unidentified format changes are probably not important. More significant, the excerpt on Stanton in chapter seven is not from volume six as stated, but five,

though the pagination is the same as Nicolay and Hay's. Most editorial omissions are properly indicated by ellipsis, but some have slipped through. On page 123 a quotation from Chase reads How singularly all our worst defeats have followed administrative blunders. Nicolay and Hay's version of the document included er-, showing that the Treasury secretary meant to write errors, but changed it to the harsher word.

Admirers of our greatest president eagerly await the appearance of Burlingame's own multi-volume biography. Given his special insights into Lincoln's sexual orientation, male friendships, marriage, and a host of other matters, will he present a version closer to reality, like that penned by Lincoln's law partner William Herndon, or will his Abraham be more akin to the heroic but mythical figure created by Nicolay and Hay? In an 1856 letter to Herndon, Lincoln called biographies as generally written . . . not only misleading, but false. Can Burlingame avoid the sentimental pieties to be found in this official biography, or will he succumb to being just another one of a long line of courtiers in Honest Abe's retinue? If the answer proves to be the latter, what size audience will he have? One suspects it will not be much larger than the present readership of Nicolay and Hay's monstrosity.

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