

Civil War Book Review

Winter 2008

Article 7

The Age of Lincoln

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Recommended Citation

Gallman, J. Matthew (2008) "The Age of Lincoln," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss1/7>

Review

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Burton, Orville Vernon *The Age of Lincoln*. Hill and Wang, \$27.00 hardcover
ISBN 9780809095131

A New Synthesis of Nineteenth-Century America

I pick up Orville Vernon Burton's *The Age of Lincoln* with some combination of admiration and trepidation. After all, quotes on the back cover promise a bold new synthesis (James McPherson), a striking interpretation (Eric Foner), a major reinterpretation (David Herbert Donald), and a remarkable reconsideration of nineteenth-century America (John Hope Franklin). That certainly sounds promising. But the story of Civil War-era America is a tune I have been singing in classrooms for nearly two decades, largely inspired by those four blurbsters and their peers. Do I really want some new voice to cover their songs? With a new semester at hand, do I really want to find my understanding of the Civil War destabilized? With a sigh, I open the impressive volume and read. Rivers of blood flowed as Americans turned against each other . . . it begins. Strap yourself in. This is not your father's New Social History.

The Age of Lincoln is a lively, entertaining, highly idiosyncratic, interpretation of the history of nineteenth century America. Like all good interpretive syntheses, Burton's tale hangs on a few big ideas. Across the national landscape, religious faith and ideological convictions waged an ongoing battle with unfettered power and cynical greed. Burton describes an antebellum world where Americans had competing visions for the future but a shared millennial spirit guiding their actions. Such fervor û both North and South û left little room for compromise when conflicts came. If Burton does not quite see a blundering generation stumbling toward war, he does find a nation of true believers following paths that seem almost inevitably to lead to carnage. This millennial fervor was acted out against the backdrop of a burgeoning market economy, destined to produce a world of strife and conflict in the generations to come. Burton places African Americans, and especially enslaved southern blacks,

squarely at the center of his story. And although much of the narrative concerns how antislavery northern whites battled slave-owning southerners for the nation's future, Burton's black characters are not passive pawns in an ideological and economic game. African Americans appear as active participants in their own futures throughout.

If blacks are at the center of the tale, Abraham Lincoln is the fulcrum upon which events turn. Burton's Lincoln is a distinctly southern man, imbued with a Southerner's sense of honor and a transcendent belief in liberty and equality, yielding his famed call for a new birth of freedom. It is Lincoln who provided the nation with that last best hope, a way to maintain a spiritual purity even while defending nationalism and embracing growth. Had Lincoln lost in 1860, Burton speculates that the Republican Party might have faded from prominence. But in victory he brought with him a southern man's refusal to yield to the Confederate ransom note of secession, and a religious fatalism that allowed him to press forward in the face of horrific carnage, convinced that he was God's instrument in a grand plan.

In a very real sense Lincoln succeeded in this new birth of freedom, as the nation endured four long years of war and produced three historic amendments that combined to end slavery, redefine citizenship, and expand suffrage to include black men. In a particularly careful analysis of Southerners' multiple perspectives on the war, Burton concludes that the Civil War illuminated fundamental flaws in antebellum southern society and that when the chips were down the South had not enough shared ideology to overcome class conflict. But the costs of success for the North were great as well, and the future darkened by the war's destruction and the loss of Abraham Lincoln to an assassin's bullet. In his close inspection of the immediate postwar South, Burton finds much to celebrate. African Americans did indeed win the vote and southern states fashioned functioning interracial governments, replete with black officeholders and a wide array of progressive reforms. But they stopped short of the sort of revolutionary land redistribution that might have left an enduring legacy. Instead, the moment passed, Northerners lost interest in the fate of the freedmen, and white Southerners gradually regained dominance over the southern political landscape. In telling this familiar portion of the larger narrative, Burton offers some interesting insights into postwar white Southerners. No unified white South rose up against Reconstruction's interracial democracy, he insists. The court records indicate that only a minority of white men . . . resorted to extralegal terrorist tactics. Most white men just did nothing, he concludes. And an

important cohort of southern whites, unfairly branded as traitors and scalawags, actually stood up for racial harmony. At least for a time. Thus, in Burton's view Reconstruction was not a fool's errand from the outset. Things really might have turned out differently, particularly as long as blacks exercised the right to vote and they found common cause with supportive whites.

But the Civil War had created a terrible theological crisis which white Protestants could not shake. Thus, when faced with the unfettered capitalism unleashed by the Civil War, and ample evidence of corruption and immorality in the North and South, those millennial voices of a previous generation were shoved to the corner, replaced by narrow-minded statesmen, chiseling lawyers, sneaking speculators, and political bagmen. Hardly the leadership to embrace Abraham Lincoln's vision. Interestingly, Burton argues that the south's African Americans were largely immune from the war's theological crisis. After all, the war had produced emancipation. Even if the postwar years yielded decades of disappointment and despair, the black millennial spirit survived with the enduring conviction that they — like Abraham Lincoln — were part of God's larger plan. But as the century came to a close the world in which they lived had grown increasingly bleak. And events in the north offered little reason for optimism as corruption and greed seemed to overwhelm all lasting vestiges of the antebellum millennial spirit. Two decades after the war more than a million Americans gathered to see the Statue of Liberty unveiled, but the sad truth was that the golden age of the millennium was nowhere in sight. Although many claimed Lincoln's mantle for their own purposes, and the Populist Tom Watson indeed sometimes sounded a bit like the martyred President, the age of Lincoln eventually slipped away in a mood of cynicism, failure, and loss.

No short summary can do justice to all the detail and nuance woven into the pages of *The Age of Lincoln*. Although he does not offer this volume as a comprehensive survey of the period, Burton at least nods at most of the important political events and many of the key figures who shaped American history in the middle period. The result is an incredibly fast-paced narrative, with episodes and observations tumbling over each other in rapid succession, often stitched together in creative and unfamiliar ways. Most of the specific items will be known to specialists, but many a passage made me rethink a familiar piece of the story, some made me chuckle, and one or two made me raise an eyebrow. A few examples will have to suffice. We learn that by mid-century Garrisonian abolitionism had become as much a self-sustaining business as a quest for moral reform, and texts by luminaries like Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Beecher Stowe

did little to buttress Christian resolve but merely helped nurture an American taste for pornography. (!) When the Democrats met in Charleston in 1860, Stephen Douglas arrived expecting a coronation and found what turned out to be closer to a mass suicidal ritual. And in Burton's hands the tense moments surrounding the firing on Fort Sumter become something of a comic farce, featuring the notoriously besotted Louis T. Wigfall rowing out to the federal fort to demand its surrender, nearly stealing the thunder from the South Carolina dignitaries who made the same demand a few hours later. Entertaining stuff.

In building his analysis, Burton has read broadly and deeply. *The Age of Lincoln* concludes with a superb bibliographic essay, giving student and buff alike an excellent window into the scholarship on nineteenth-century America. But this strength also underscores a disappointing shortcoming in this intriguing volume. The publishers have chosen to put each chapter's (excellent) note on sources and scholarly footnotes on a web page rather than between the covers of the actual book. Call me old fashioned, but one joy of reading a book û particularly a book like this û is that I can enjoy it far away from my computer. Time and again I read a passage and found myself wondering what historians had inspired that insight or what evidence supported the assertion. But I was sitting in a coffee shop or on a park bench, comfortably removed from the internet. No doubt this publishing decision reflected a calculation about dollars and cents. I suppose those are the perils of unfettered capitalism.

J. Matthew Gallman is a professor of history at the University of Florida. The author of various publications on the Civil War home front, his most recent book is America's Joan of Arc: The Life of Anna Elizabeth Dickinson (Oxford, 2006). He is currently working on a history of satire and dissent in the North during the Civil War.