

Did Lincoln Own Slaves?: and Other Frequently Asked Questions About Abraham Lincoln

Jeffry D. Wert

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Review

Wert, Jeffrey D.

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Prokopowicz, Gerald J. *Did Lincoln Own Slaves?: And Other Frequently Asked Questions About Abraham Lincoln.* Pantheon, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 9780375425417

Answering Questions about Lincoln

The purpose of this book, according to Gerald J. Prokopowicz, is to answer questions about Abraham Lincoln posed by the public, not by historians and professors. In all, Prokopowicz has offered more than 325 questions. As would be expected in such a book, the questions and answers range from the mundane to the historically important about the country's major political figure. The author has arranged his question-and-answer format into categories or chapters—the boy, rail-splitter, Springfield, politician, speaker, president, commander-in-chief, Gettysburg, emancipation, the man, martyr, and legacy. This format allows a reader easy access to specific aspects of Lincoln and his life. Each question is in bold print, followed by the author's answer.

The result of Prokopowicz's effort is a work replete with information about Lincoln. One of the author's primary aims is to clarify and to debunk the fallacies and legends that have surrounded the real and mythic sixteenth president. When controversial issues remain unresolved, Prokopowicz presents both sides of the dispute. After each chapter, he provides further readings on the topics.

Prokopowicz provides answers for the curious and for well-read Lincoln buffs: What were the sizes of his shoes and hat; was his mother illegitimate; when did he and Mary Todd meet and how was their marriage; was he gay; did he suffer from manic depression; was he racist; did he own slaves; was he our greatest president; and what are the best and worst books and movies on him? These questions are just isolated examples of the breadth of inquiry posed by the author. Likewise, Prokopowicz's answers vary from the terse to the detailed. When examining specific mythic aspects of Lincoln's life, the author delves into the sources of the myths. At times, he laces his answers with humor or with

contemporary parallels. In places, these replies have merit; in others they seem contrived, detracting from the book's overall fine qualities.

A major inquiry in the book centers upon Lincoln's views on slavery, African-Americans, and emancipation. As Prokopowicz notes, these issues have generated arguments particularly since the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The author examines the differing opinions on the subjects, frequently quoting Lincoln's words. It is a balanced and judicious examination of a pertinent and contentious topic.

Despite the book's format and purpose, *Did Lincoln Own Slaves?* is a serious work of history. The author is a Lincoln scholar, and it shows in his grasp of Lincoln historiography and his knowledge of the details of Lincoln's life. Much of value can be gleaned from these pages even for the most dedicated and informed Lincoln readers.

Americans' fascination with Abraham Lincoln continues unabated and will undoubtedly intensify during the celebration of the bicentennial of his birth in 2009. For many Americans their knowledge of him is colored by legend, misinformation, folklore, and glaring newspaper headlines. While Prokopowicz's book will not replace the fine biographies and studies of Lincoln, it is an excellent starting place for learning about the man and for getting right with history.

Jeffry D. Wert, a high school history teacher, is the author of Cavalryman of the Lost Cause: A Biography of J. E. B. Stuart to be published in September 2008.