

Lincoln Revisited: New Insights From the Lincoln Forum

Gerald J. Prokopowicz

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Review

Prokopowicz, Gerald J.

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Perspectives on Lincoln

The Lincoln Forum is a unique organization, and this selection of presentations from its annual meetings in 2003-2005 is a unique volume. The Forum first met in 1996, after a schism within the venerable Abraham Lincoln Association prompted several former members to start their own Lincoln group. Membership in the Forum is open to the public, and the annual meeting (held in Gettysburg on the days leading up to the anniversary of the Address on November 19) is regularly attended by some three hundred of them, filling the lecture room to capacity. It has been the Lincoln Forum's policy to retain its intimate venue, in a hotel located on the battlefield, in order to foster informal contact between speakers and audience. To reach more people, the Forum has arranged to have its proceedings televised by C-SPAN in some years, and to have selected presentations published by Fordham University Press.

What makes this different from other volumes of proceedings is that the Lincoln Forum is not a professional academic organization, nor an amateur enthusiast group, but a hybrid between the two. The speakers whose talks appear in this volume include professional historians, but also political scientists, poets, judges, and freelance writers. Their eighteen relatively brief offerings are (with some exceptions) not academic essays presenting original research on narrow topics for the readers of professional journals, but in many cases are summaries of the authors' forthcoming or most recent books. This is the Forum's greatest appeal: it gives its audience a sense of current trends in Lincoln studies directly from those doing the writing, along with an opportunity to interact with those writers.

In printed form, the opportunity to interact is lost, but the essays still give the reader valuable summaries of many of the most important recent books about Abraham Lincoln. Readers who have not yet read the latest work by Matthew Pinsker on the Soldiers' Home, Harold Holzer on the Cooper Union address, Lucas Morel or Ronald White on the Second Inaugural, Joseph Fornieri on Lincoln's political faith, John Marszalek on Henry Halleck, William C. Harris on Lincoln's last months, or Daniel Mark Epstein on Lincoln and Whitman, to give some examples, will get a sufficient taste from the entries in this volume to decide whether to pursue those topics further. Considering the flood of publications on the subject, this is no small service. The corresponding drawback is that those who have read them will find little new here. The one essay based on a work still forthcoming (Craig Symonds's study of Lincoln and his admirals) retains the appeal of a sneak preview, but as this volume ages, and as the deservedly wide readership of its contributors grows, more and more of its content risks becoming redundant.

The best of the essays avoid this possibility by taking the opportunity to explore their topics in more detail. Readers of Garry Wills's *Henry Adams and the Making of America* (2005) will already know something about Adams's view of Lincoln, but they will learn more from the author's wonderfully written piece here. Likewise, William Lee Miller uses the single episode of Lincoln's refusal to pardon convicted slave trader Nathaniel Gordon to introduce the topic of Lincoln's presidential leadership, which he explores more fully in *President Lincoln: The Duty of a Statesman* (2008). Daniel Mark Epstein goes deeper into textual analysis of Whitman's influence on Lincoln's style in his essay than he did in *Lincoln and Whitman: Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington* (2004), and Edward Steers takes the opportunity to reply to criticism of his *Blood on the Moon* (2001) by marshalling the evidence of Confederate support for John Wilkes Booth's activities. Michl Vorenberg updates his own changing views on Lincoln and colonization in *After Emancipation: Abraham Lincoln's Black Dream*. In one of the few essays not immediately related to a larger work, John Y. Simon explores Lincoln's curious refusal to exploit Mormon polygamy and its implications for popular sovereignty during the 1858 debates with Stephen Douglas.

As its somewhat vague title suggests, this volume does not have a central theme, but certain topics receive more attention than other, reflecting the themes of the Lincoln Forum programs from which they originated. Religion, for example, is the subject of several essays, including Joseph Fornieri's strained

attempt to portray Lincoln as a faith-based politician, Lucas Morel's more sophisticated analysis of Lincoln's understanding of the intersection of politics and religion, and Jean Baker's intriguing look at the changing personal religious experiences of Abraham and Mary Lincoln. The theme of Lincoln and leadership is repeated, less successfully, in an after-dinner talk by Geoffrey Perret that will do nothing to enhance its author's reputation for historical accuracy, a combative piece by Jean Edward Smith on Grant and Lincoln, and Frank William's comparative look at violations of civil liberties by Lincoln and George W. Bush, apparently delivered in 2003, and to some degree overtaken by events since then.

There are some technical improvements one could wish for in this series (two other volumes of Lincoln Forum essays have already appeared), such as inclusion of the date of the original presentation of each essay, and especially an index. More rigorous editing, to remove some of the throat-clearing that precedes several of the talks, would be welcome. Overall, however, Fordham University Press should be commended for working with the Lincoln Forum to produce this book. In an era when bookstore shelves are groaning with new Lincoln titles, *Lincoln Revisited* gives overburdened Lincoln readers a valuable tool for deciding which ones deserves their further attention.

Gerald J. Prokopowicz is Acting Chair and Associate Professor of History at East Carolina University. He is the author of Did Lincoln Own Slaves? And Other Frequently Asked Questions about Abraham Lincoln (2008).