

Civil War Obscura: Lincoln On The Eve Of '61

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Review

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Villard, Henry *Civil War Obscura: Lincoln On the Eve of '61*. A.A. Knopf; First Edition edition (1941), \$10.00 ISBN 9781131178097

A Journalist's View of Lincoln

For those of us who enjoy searching for, and reading, out-of-print books about the Civil War era, look no further. This column, Civil War Obscura, focuses on popular, but lesser known books of the period. No printed text is off limits; fiction, non-fiction, personal memoirs, and virtually all other printed materials are all welcome here. The goal here is to introduce both lay readers, independent scholars, and academics to historical voices beyond their usual interests or specializations. I hope Civil War Obscura is well received. Please feel inspired to add suggestions of your own!

The first book in this project is *Lincoln on the Eve of '61: A Journalist's Story* by Henry Villard. Best known as a successful nineteenth-century railroad promoter and financier, German-born Henry Villard (1835–1900) was also among the most conscientious and able journalists of the 1860s. Villard filed stories from the Illinois capital almost daily to the New York *Herald*, slightly less often to the Cincinnati *Commercial*, and occasionally to the San Francisco *Bulletin*. He was twenty-five and had only been in the United States for seven years when he was given the job of reporting on President-elect Lincoln from the time of his election in November 1860 to his arrival in Washington in February 1861.

It is only 105 pages long, but packed with personal observations and slim slices of Lincoln's life. It was published in 1940 by the Curtis Publishing Company and edited by Harold and Oswald Villard, sons of Henry Villard and Fanny Garrison Villard. Fanny was the daughter of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. I suspect the Villards were truly a "power couple" of their time.

During the time Villard was with Lincoln, he sent scores of dispatches from Springfield, Illinois describing the president-elect's doings, quoting or paraphrasing his statements, chronicling events in the Illinois capital, and analyzing the city's mood. This sort of journalism makes Lincoln and his entourage seem much more human, at least to me, and the dispatches gathered in this volume constitute the most intensive--nay, intimate--journalistic coverage that Lincoln ever received.

Lincoln welcomed Villard and encouraged him to ask questions, as he was the only full-time correspondent for out-of-town papers. Villard spoke with inside sources, such as Lincoln's private secretaries John G. Nicolay and John Hay, devoted friends like Jesse K. Dubois and Stephen T. Logan, political leaders like Governor Richard Yates, and journalists like William M. Springer and Robert R. Hitt. All too often these men are overlooked. They were not generals, and they often get lost in the fog of war, yet they were President Lincoln's support group, and they firmly connected him to his Illinois roots, even when Washington politics appeared to overwhelm everything.

This small book filled with examples of Henry Villard's terrifically wry sense of humor, making the writing very readable. For instance, he boasted that he did Lincoln a service by scaring off would-be office seekers who, fearing to see their names published in newspapers, gave up plans to visit the Illinois capital to badger the president-elect. Villard may have done an even greater service by publicizing Lincoln's views on the secession crisis. After all, many only knew Lincoln from what they read in the newspapers. It was the reporting of the Cooper Union speech that first made him a man of interest outside of his native Illinois. It was Villard who approached president-elect Lincoln on the Inaugural Express train after it had left Springfield on February 10, 1861. He requested a copy of Lincoln's "farewell address, " just given minutes before the train departed. Lincoln wrote it out and Villard telegraphed it to the New York *Herald* along with this report: "The cheers are always for Lincoln and the Constitution. The President-elect continues reserved and thoughtful, and sits most of the time alone in the private saloon prepared for his special use. "

Not only informative but also highly readable, Villard's vivid descriptions of Lincoln's appearance, daily routine, and visitors, combined with fresh information about Springfield, state political leaders, and the capital, constitute an invaluable resource. The "Prologue" provides an excellent background of Villard's friendship with Lincoln, and the "Epilogue" contains Villard's account

of Lincoln's 1860 inauguration.

After all the books that have made Abraham Lincoln into an American icon, it is pure pleasure to read one in which annoyance with the Lincoln children is a recurrent theme. The small volume is not hard to get; it is available at amazon.com for about \$10.00. It is also available at books.google.com, but not as a PDF file. It shows up on eBay occasionally as well. This little treasure is worth the effort to obtain, and I highly recommend adding it to your personal collection.

Meg Groeling received her MA in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: the Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which Southern Illinois Press has contracted for publication sometime within the next two years. She is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War.