

Every Drop of Blood: The Momentous Second Inauguration of Abraham Lincoln

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Review

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Achorn, Edward. *Every Drop of Blood: The Momentous Second Inauguration of Abraham Lincoln*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$28.00. ISBN: 978-0-8021-4874-2

(Please note that, in full disclosure, this reviewer did read the manuscript version of this book in advance of publication.)

After President Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, Union officer Charles Francis Adams, Jr. wrote his father, the American Minister to England, "That rail-splitting lawyer is one of the wonders of the day. Once at Gettysburg and now again on a greater occasion he has shown a capacity for rising to the demands of the hour which we should not expect from orators or men of the schools. This inaugural strikes me in its grand simplicity and directness as being for all time the historical keynote of this war...." Edward Achorn's new book relives the Second Inauguration and its context. The author's retelling of that March 4, 1865 day in Washington makes the reader feel as if they were there.

Lincoln did not boast of imminent victory by the Northern armies, as many expected. Instead, he spoke of the infliction of war on all Americans during his first presidential term. The 702-word speech was the second shortest since George Washington's Second Inaugural Address, but it remains one of the most unique and iconic in United States history. As the author points out, the first eight words of Lincoln's last paragraph of the address proclaim an enduring promise of reconciliation: "With malice toward none, with charity for all," and became the most memorable ones. After his assassination, they came to represent his legacy to the nation and the world. Instead of rallying his followers, in the name of God, to support the war, Lincoln concluded with an unexpected code of healing, "to bind up...to care for...to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace...."

During his Second Inaugural, Lincoln stated that "what he had learned from four years of horror and suffering; and sending young men to their deaths...the irreparable loss, tears, and heartbreak in homes across America." He was mourning for lost sons – South as well as North. War exaggerates human nature's extremes, but the Civil War also brought to light the unique fragilities and strengths of the first modern democratic republic. Reflecting these extremes, Achorn recounts Vice President Andrew Johnson's drunken speech before taking the oath of office. While the Democratic *Chicago Times* reviewed the President's as, "[b]y the side of it, mediocrity is suburb." His critics disliked the speech stating that it was weakened by its tone of conciliation; while others criticized his comments that "[e]very drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword" were inappropriate. Lincoln believed that the war was divine punishment for slavery and the North was to blame as well as the South. He reached beyond fanaticism and criticism.

Standing beneath the Capitol's recently-finished majestic iron dome and before a crowded Washington and its muddy streets, Lincoln opened the door to what he hoped would be "a just, and lasting peace." He carried the scales of justice into his speech despite knowing that Americans had always been uncomfortable facing up to their own potential for malevolence. The President suggested that the war was a means of purging the nation of its historic sin of slavery, "until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword." It was the language of a judge, not the legal language of the lawyer who delivered the First Inaugural Address four years earlier. It took only six or seven minutes to deliver, yet it contains many of the most memorable phrases in American political oratory. The speech contained neither gloating nor rejoicing – accounting for the confusion of many listeners gathered under a rain-filled sky. Rather, it offered Lincoln's deepest personal reflections on the causes and the meaning of the war. The "scourge of war," he explained, was best understood as divine punishment for the sin of slavery, a sin in which all Americans, North as well as South, were complicit. It described a national moral debt that had been created by the "bondsmen's 250 years of unrequited toil," and ends with a call for compassion and reconciliation.

The tragic events at Ford's theatre followed only a month later. Some Radical Republicans rejoiced, albeit quietly, that the post-war peace would not necessarily follow Lincoln's vision. Many Americans turned from thoughts of a peaceful reunification to those of vengeance. Radical Republican Congressman George Julian wrote the day after Lincoln's assassination "that his death is a Godsend."

Achorn's book brings in other historical figures from that time, including Walt Whitman, Frederick Douglass, and John Wilkes Booth. Besides authoring the pioneering and controversial *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman served as a nurse in Washington, D.C. hospitals during the Civil War. Douglass was the foremost orator, author, and activist promoting the idea of civil rights and liberties for African Americans. Meanwhile, during that inauguration day, Booth stalked Lincoln, foreshadowing the end of both of them. Achorn replicates the eloquence of the speech and the 20,000 people who came to witness it. The book's narrative form provides for both a chronological view of the day's events, while providing for a broad ranging review of the events and Americans – white and black – that led to this day. This approach provides a helpful framing to the story. In addition, as the former chief editorial writer at *The Providence Journal*, Achorn uses his skills as a writer and historian and keeps the reader engaged in the story knowing what will occur. His use of eyewitnesses throughout brings significant value to both a casual reader and historian. These accounts accurately portray their ambivalence, enthusiasm, horror, and surprise. They are indispensable to understanding the citizen's thoughts and feelings during the closing days of the Civil War. It is Edward Achorn's capacity for turning the lens back into full view that makes his work so profound and convincing.

Frank J. Williams is the founding Chair of the Lincoln Forum, President of The Ulysses S. Grant Association and Presidential Library, and regular *Civil War Book Review* columnist for Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.