

The Last Lincoln Republican: The Election of 1880.

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Review

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Arrington, Benjamin. *The Last Lincoln Republican: The Election of 1880.* University Press of Kansas, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$39.95 ISBN 9780700629824 pp. xii,220

Wedged between two elections, one notorious for fraud and the other for scandal, the 1880 presidential contest may be the least noticed and written about of any in the Gilded Age. In *The Last Lincoln Republican*, Benjamin Arrington seeks to rescue it from that forlorn eminence, or, rather the career of its winner and the part that he played in it. In doing so, he offers hints that James A. Garfield's barely-begun presidency might have renewed his party's commitment to equal rights for all.

Garfield has had excellent biographers, and books, some lively, some studious, have covered 1880. Arrington's does so more succinctly, telling of how vying candidates strove for the Republican and Democratic nominations and then of the campaign that followed, in which Garfield bested General Winfield Scott Hancock, not least because of the latter's comment that the tariff was a local issue, a statement that, taken out of context (as it is here) revealed Hancock's dunderheaded unfitness for the highest office in the land. That Arrington takes a privileged place in Garfield's cheering section will surprise no reader, and considering the Ohioan's experience, reflectiveness, and ability, may only seem natural.

Readers may wonder how *The Last Lincoln Republican* says anything new about the campaign, either before or after the conventions; the more scholarly may wonder what new sources or methodological techniques Arrington has brought to bear, or what subjects he addresses that have not been covered before. The answer in either case: none. For a good understanding of how the parties managed the campaign or raised money or even how they used the tariff and bloody shirt issues, they must needs scour the literature elsewhere. The Democratic side of the canvass is barely sketched in and abandoned. The author gives much more attention to the more congenial topic of Garfield's efforts to woo Senator Roscoe Conkling to his support.

Indeed, the whole shape of the book makes one wonder how much the campaign itself matters to the author, or whether this instead is meant to be a monograph about Garfield, its subtitle to the contrary. The Republican convention gets two chapters and forty pages—the fall campaign one, thirty-three pages in all, including half-page illustrations. Where three chapters lead up to Republicans' nomination of Garfield, including one about Garfield himself, the Democratic race to Hancock's selection gets one.

Can we blame Garfield for this account's limitations? In a sense. Concentrating his attention on his main figure in the text, Arrington has done the very same in his mining of sources. Garfield's diary gets used extensively, along with his speeches and published collections of his letters. Some newspapers do get cited, more for opinion than reportage. Beyond that, though, the author essentially relies on other historians for the facts. A vast treasure-trove of manuscript collections cover the election: the papers of William E. Chandler, John Sherman, Thomas F. Bayard, Samuel J. Tilden, and Samuel J. Randall, to name a few. None of them is so much as touched. Nor, in fact, are the James A. Garfield Papers themselves.

By choosing so limited a range of sources, Arrington simply cannot do more than skim the surface of events; he cannot change any previous account on any substantial point, factual or interpretive. Nor does he. Reading Randall's and Bayard's papers, he would have found that the tariff issue was much more important than *The Last Lincoln Republican* makes out. He would have discovered what other scholars made clear to their readers about Hancock's famous gaffe. By October, the general was finding that the Democratic tariff-for-revenue plank was inflicting a searing damage on party prospects, particularly in must-have states like Connecticut and New Jersey. Only a reassuring statement could counter what was turning into Republicans' strongest selling point. But for its last badly misconstrued (and, contrary to this author, pretty defensible) assertion, properly understood, Hancock's would have done just that and within days he had issued a letter clarifying his commitment not to shake the protective system. (Readers incidentally may wonder from Arrington's narrative why Democrats felt it necessary to do damage control for Hancock's statement (p. 155) three weeks before he made it (p. 150)).

A deeper immersion in newspaper reports would explain what Arrington cannot: how the Democrats lost New York—which had everything to do with Tammany Hall's bullheaded insistence on running a Catholic for mayor of New York City. Newspaper and manuscript alike could have answered what truth there was in one of the most infamous charges of the campaign,

that “soap”—that is, vote-buying money—carried Indiana for Republicans. Here, it goes almost unmentioned; but then, so was one of the strongest reasons why James G. Blaine failed at the presidential nomination—his gamy and not wholly fair reputation for crookedness. Only in reading the press intensively could any author have taken hold of the most important non-story in the whole campaign. A Solid South went solidly Democratic. But the methods Redeemers used to make it happen and the ways in which democracy was denied are too important to have gone untold. Fresh blood, after all, dappled the “bloody shirt” this year as in every other where Republicans dared to ask for a free, fair count. The reason the election ended up as it did, with Republican gains in House and Senate, and why voters narrowly preferred Garfield to Hancock, might have had a satisfactory answer if this book spent a page or two analyzing the returns. If, say, Republicans gained votes in every industrial state (and they did) and most of their House seats there, was it because voters felt that Democrats were a party of Rebels and racists or because they feared what a tariff-revising party would do, on coming to power?

Arrington’s chief contribution, then, lies in his claim that Garfield was “the last Lincoln Republican,” deeply committed to civil rights. Had fate given him the chance, readers are led to infer, the Ohioan would have worked to reverse the nation’s course away from racial injustice. Perhaps. But the evidence that this book produces is slim and, for Republicans in general, nil. Giving a hasty once-over to the sectional issue during the campaign, Arrington offers nothing to show that those denouncing the Solid South so much as hinted at a roll-back. If they did, is there any who promised government action to bolster black voters’ rights, much less specifying exactly how? Did Garfield, at least publicly? Or, for that matter, even make that vow to himself privately? We must take the author at his word that Garfield would have done something. But that is all we have to go on. Nothing in the inaugural or in his appointive policy shows it; if he had even considered remedial legislation in the most general way either before or after the election, not a scrap of evidence gets presented here. From the material Arrington musters, that brief presidency was consumed in a fight between two factions of “ins” over who would get the offices.

Is the real problem that nothing new can be said about the 1880 election? By no means. The hardening hegemony of the Solid South—the changes that Republicans discovered how to ring on the tariff—the broad variety of ways in which the sectional issue could be adapted to be serviceable after Reconstruction’s end—the burgeoning need for money to run a national

campaign and the shift from hoopla to education and advertisement to sell the candidates like a product—the evolution, beginning with Garfield himself, of candidates’ proper role into making appearances and delivering speeches, albeit from a front porch—all of these and more await their chronicler. *The Last Lincoln Republican* is not the last word.

Mark Wahlgren Summers, the Tom Clark Chair in History, has taught at the University of Kentucky since 1984. Earning his Ph. D. at the University of California at Berkeley, he has written some nine books. At present he is working on *Lecompton: The Stolen Election that Made Lincoln President*, *Big Tim & the Tiger*, and *The Fate of the Nation Was Riding That Night: 1860*.