

Lincoln and Native Americans

Scott W. Berg

George Mason University, sberg1@gmu.edu

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Review

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Green, Michael S. *Lincoln and Native Americans*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$24.95 ISBN 9780809338252 pp. 176

The essential fact of Abraham Lincoln's interconnections with the world of Native America is that while there were many, most occurred at a remove. In 1786, before Lincoln's birth, his grandfather, also named Abraham, was killed by Shawnees as he worked to clear a farm field; Lincoln's father-to-be, Thomas, was nearly abducted during that same incident. Mordecai, Thomas's brother and Lincoln's future uncle, became a virulent Indian hater and later in life was known to leave his house for days at a time on murderous missions of private vengeance. As he grew up, Abraham Lincoln heard these stories from the older generations in his family. In 1832, when the future president won his first election—a victory he later called “a success which gave me more pleasure than any I have had since”—it was for the captaincy of his militia company as he prepared to join the Black Hawk War, where he saw no fighting. Decades later, as president, Indian agents and military men assigned their positions as part of the Republican patronage network with Lincoln at its head took leading roles in the massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho at Colorado's Sand Creek, and in the Long Walk of the Navajo.

As Michael S. Green makes clear in *Lincoln and Native Americans*, a new and valuable volume in Southern Illinois University's ever-expanding Concise Lincoln Library series, this was the pattern of Lincoln's life. He was not asked to make any first-hand decisions regarding the fates of individual Native Americans except once, a moment that served as a tragic and dramatic exception to the rule. In the fall of 1862, a letter came to his desk from civilian and military officials in Minnesota asking for the president's approval to hang 303 captive Dakota. Some of the condemned were accused of participating in a massacre that had left scores of white farmers and their wives and children dead along a prairie river valley southwest of St. Paul; but most were accused of taking part in a series of small but bloody battles against the U.S. Army, which had been called out to drive the Dakota from the state's borders and secure the capture of Little

Crow, their leader. Hard legal questions followed the verdicts, including those about the appropriateness of the drumhead trials and the status of the Dakota as military combatants.

Even in this instance, though, Lincoln operated mostly through intermediaries, assigning three White House lawyers to painstakingly vet the military commission's convictions according to a set of strict legal criteria of the president's own devising. In the end, Lincoln did not put 303 men to death; he stayed (but did not commute) 264 of the death sentences, a decision which cost him considerable support among Minnesota's Republicans (for the stays of execution) and earned him the enmity of many Dakota and their descendants (for the executions). One piece of the documentary record points keenly to his unusual personal involvement: a list of the condemned, in Lincoln's own hand, complete with phonetic spellings of Dakota names in quotation marks.

As Green aptly points out, "The executions were not an ending, but the beginning of a discussion without end" (83). The challenge in writing about Lincoln and Native America is that the president, in the three years remaining before his death by assassination, took little part in those discussions. The vast majority of the long and bloody national struggle over Indian lives, lands, and rights occurred well after Lincoln's death and the end of the Civil War, and Green's book does not make the mistake of trying to invest Lincoln too much in the fate of Native America, or worse, to pretend as though Lincoln, had he lived, might have somehow fostered the lasting, peaceful, and mutually beneficial coexistence between Whites and Native Americans that escaped every other leader on both sides of the conflict.

Instead, *Lincoln and Native Americans* serves as a necessary and brief (161 pages in total, 53 of those devoted to end matter) framing of the history of Native America as it intersected Lincoln's personal and political lives and, more fully, an introduction to the political context of Native American relations just before and during Lincoln's presidency. Green's book, and the genre to which it belongs, can be called parallel history, or history by proximity: an examination of two historical streams—in this case, a president's biography and the history of the vast, widely spread world that was nineteenth-century Native America—as they wind along side by side, sometimes coming within sight of one another but rarely mixing waters.

Green uses six tidy chapters to zero in on six separate topics: Lincoln's family history; his service (such as it was) during the Black Hawk War; federal Indian policy in the run-up to the 1860 election; shifting Cherokee alliances with North and South during the Civil War; the

Dakota War of 1862 and the execution of thirty-eight Dakota; and events in the American West during Lincoln's presidency, including the Massacre at Sand Creek and the Long Walk of the Navajo. Together they serve as a smart, no-nonsense overview of the topic, and individually they make excellent study guides. *Lincoln and Native Americans* is sharp in many areas, but most of all in two: the first, Lincoln's evolution on the twin "solutions" of concentration and colonization as they applied both to African slaves and to Native Americans; and the second, in its discussion of the effects of the obscene monetary spoils available for non-elected officials by way of the federal patronage system. Green's book, like the Concise Lincoln Library series to which it belongs, demonstrates the value of approaching a life like Lincoln's in smaller increments, while at the same time it serves to point out the staggering number of historical increments in Lincoln's life still available for historians to consider.

Scott W. Berg is the author of Grand Avenues: The Story of Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the French Visionary Who Designed Washington, D.C.; 38 Nooses: Lincoln, Little Crow, and the Beginning of the Frontier's End; and the upcoming The Burning of the World: The Great Chicago Fire? and the Struggle for a City's Soul. He teaches publishing and nonfiction writing and literature at George Mason University and lives with his family in Reston, Virginia.