Review Essay

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More than half a century after David Herbert Donald noted the tendency of Americans to “get right with Lincoln,” scholars still are trying to get right with him—and to get him right. No American has been the subject of more writing, whether the author is dealing with Lincoln’s life, times, or a combination of both. And the reasons are obvious: He is the president who waged the bloodiest war in the nation’s history yet seems the embodiment of the best of humanity and humaneness, the “shut-mouthed man” who kept his own counsel yet told more stories than even Carl Sandburg could recount, the leader who became a national father figure, husband, and parent who endured the deaths of two of his sons and a marriage that was filled either with love or with distance, the backwoods son of a yeoman who escaped that life as soon as he could and chose to be a celebrant of free labor, the hater of slavery who killed the institution or prolonged its existence, and the white supremacist without the racism characteristic of his time. The person is an attractive enough subject. The contradictions make him all the more enthralling.

One of those contradictions is apparent in these three books. For all that has been written about Lincoln, if he had died in 1859, his obituary would have consisted of a few lines, and he would have been quickly forgotten. While his life was, of course, tragically cut short, his importance and influence rested mainly on a highly concentrated series of events—the good or bad luck of being the president whose election prompted the South to secede. Thus, he
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is the subject of lengthy biographies. Some have been multi-volume—as with John G. Nicolay and John Hay, Carl Sandburg, James G. Randall and Richard N. Current, and Michael Burlingame’s pending work. But most of them certainly are lengthy, perhaps five hundred pages, yet always leaving room for still more facts and interpretations.

Between them, William E. Gienapp, James A. Rawley, and Thomas Keneally have produced three valuable and interesting books that, piled atop one another, are about as hefty as Donald’s Lincoln or the earlier biographies by Benjamin Thomas and Stephen Oates. That was intentional, since all three authors set out to produce short, readable biographies, less for scholars than for general readers. All three succeed, but in different ways and to differing degrees.

“It is one of the ironies of history that someone as conservative as Abraham Lincoln presided over the greatest revolution in American history,” writes Gienapp (xi). Gienapp’s Lincoln was conservative, but adaptable—a good person, a shrewd politician, an able leader, and committed above all to the Union. Befitting Gienapp’s earlier work on the origins of the Republican party, he emphasizes Lincoln as politician, participating in the great game that politics was and still should be, and as a leader.

Gienapp’s portrait ultimately is the most satisfying of the three for the reader seeking a general, readable Lincoln biography. While he understandably devotes less space to Lincoln’s earlier years (he takes office at page 78, close to one-third of the way into the book) than to the presidential years, he offers a rounded portrait of the younger Lincoln. Granting that Thomas Lincoln worked hard and meant well, Gienapp, like Lincoln himself, finds little to admire in Lincoln’s father. He avoids understating, over stating, or psychoanalyzing the role of Ann Rutledge, simply pointing out that they appear to have been engaged, that her death “produced the first significant references by associates to Lincoln’s deep-seated melancholy, which verged on depression and continued to plague him throughout his life,” and that he was courting Mary Owens within a year (21). Gienapp’s survey of Lincoln’s legal career shows his familiarity with the important project of collecting and analyzing the legal papers, but he avoids the tantalizing trap of dwelling too long on it. His Lincoln of New Salem and Springfield was, as the Lyceum speech suggests, trying to manage a difficult combination of ambition for place, passion for issues, desire for advancement, and need for simplicity. Within a few pages, Gienapp neatly ties together Lincoln’s rare public outbursts, such as the “skinning” of
Jesse Thomas and the near-duel with James Shields, his Whiggish economic policies, and his acceptance (and lack of it) by Springfield society. Gienapp evaluates his courtship of and marriage to Mary Todd without agreeing completely with Jean H. Baker’s sympathetic portrait or William Herndon’s depiction of a hellcat. Although more inclined to dismiss Mary as “self-centered” rather than troubled, and critical of her actions as first lady, he notes, “Neither Lincoln nor his wife was blameless” (92, 45).

Gienapp’s work begins to soar in tandem with Lincoln’s political career, which was transformed in 1854 when he opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the man who would become his greatest rival, Stephen A. Douglas. Gienapp cleaves to two main points: that Lincoln’s “moral passion now ran deeper as he shifted his primary focus from economic issues to slavery,” especially when this distinguished him from the far less committed Douglas, and this change also manifested itself in public speeches that were “more crisp and lean, like the man himself” (50). He traces Lincoln’s antislavery ideology, which he correctly calls unoriginal but unlike that of more theoretical foes of slavery, expressed in clear, understandable terms. He presents a straightforward version of the debates with Douglas and traces how they fit into a discernable pattern of events that culminated with Lincoln’s election in 1860.

Gienapp’s study of the war years is full of information familiar to any Lincoln scholar and interpretations that make the general reader aware that not all of the facts about Lincoln are simply cut and dried. Gienapp’s emphasis is on Lincoln’s development as a leader—a long, slow process, befitting Lincoln’s tendency to think long and slowly about his positions. Gienapp traverses the familiar terrain of Lincoln’s unsystematic approach to running his office and his cabinet. He assesses Lincoln’s relations with his military commanders without sparing McClellan for his egotism and slowness, although he faults Lincoln, too, for “placing McClellan on the same level with him,” which “merely stoked the general’s vanity and fostered his contemptuous attitude . . .” (97).

In a sense, though, while Gienapp never denies Lincoln’s political genius, he seems to struggle at times to escape Donald’s interpretive shadow. After describing Lincoln as conservative, he argues that Lincoln gradually evolved into believing that the war must become a revolution. The combination of replacing McClellan and Don Carlos Buell, and moving toward emancipation, revealed the change. But as Gienapp makes equally clear, Lincoln long had sought a harder-fought war than some of his key generals seemed
willing to deliver. Granted, that hardly makes Lincoln revolutionary, but Gienapp tends to follow Donald’s point on Lincoln’s passivity.

Gienapp contradicts that view when he tries to answer his own question about Lincoln: “How had he come to be such a successful president?” (189). The answer was that Lincoln was the sum of his parts. His often lonely upbringing and his local political battles gave him an intuitive understanding of human nature and great confidence in the strengths of democracy. Indeed, as Gienapp makes clear, the only thing in which Lincoln had more confidence than democracy was himself, and he was willing to make tough decisions on his own. Incredibly patient, a trait that “his numerous political failures and difficult marriage surely reinforced,” he never succumbed to temper or vengeance, especially when it could backfire on him (190). The massive outpouring of national grief that followed his assassination might have shocked politicians with a less sure sense of themselves and the public, but he was sure of the good in others and the good judgment in himself. These were the keys to what Gienapp called his “journey to greatness”—a journey that Gienapp carefully, accurately, and interestingly captures (203).

James A. Rawley’s introduction to the new edition of his book explains his goal: providing “a fresh look at Abraham Lincoln,” with three main themes: his nationalism, especially in contrast to the states’ rights policies of many other politicians of his time; his use of the war power; and his role as a national leader (vii). Rawley achieves his goal, but in a different form than the other two books. As he writes, “It is not a study of a master politician, though Lincoln was that and this book will evidence his political skill. It is not a study of the Great Emancipator, though Lincoln was that also. Nor is it the study of a frontier democrat, folksy Westerner, prairie lawyer, rail splitter, Honest Abe, saint, martyr, self-made man, or beleaguered president beset by radicals in his party” (xii). In contrast to Gienapp and Keneally, Rawley devotes little space to Lincoln’s early life—only thirty-four pages to the prepresidential years. Nearly two pages of that summarize and analyze the Peoria speech of October 1854, which he correctly notes that “some writers assert is the beginning of his greatness” (16). Rawley believes in Lincoln’s long-standing commitment to antislavery and quotes judiciously from earlier letters and public statements. But he also explains the speedy survey of the prepresidential years by noting Lincoln’s youth. He was only fifty-one at the time of his election,
which meant that he meshed nicely with the more youthful and modern northern population. It also meant that he was young enough to be still evolving: “The Whig program had produced a partisan; the antislavery movement had produced a public figure; the threat to the Union produced a statesman” (41).

According to Rawley, the presidency itself was in a state of flux, and Lincoln did a great deal to move it in a particular direction. Rawley cites examples from the crucial works that Lincoln read, from *The Federalist* onward, to argue that Lincoln had a great deal of freedom to decide what were the powers of the presidency, and he “imaginatively and vigorously drew on his authority as commander-in-chief to wage and win the war” (48). That power concentrated on saving the Union by whatever steps he deemed necessary. Some of Lincoln’s methods were innovative. One, which Rawley considers extremely important and has received less attention from historians, was his use of public letters to explain himself and put his opponents in their place, whether it was responding to Horace Greeley’s plea for emancipation or Kentuckians who opposed black soldiers. He issued proclamations, not just the famous one on emancipation—but military orders and messages that gave him another outlet for reflecting and molding public opinion.

Like Gienapp, Rawley is detailed about Lincoln’s handling of politics and the military, and neither startling nor unusual in interpreting them. But Rawley carefully puts Lincoln’s actions in the perspective he outlines at the outset, which also serves the purpose of highlighting Lincoln’s importance still more. He sees Lincoln as entering the presidency with the commitment to union and good common sense needed to steer the North to victory. He grew in the job as he learned more about the people he had named to the cabinet and to military commands. Rawley marshals quotations from such varied subjects as General Erasmus Keyes, abolitionist Joshua Giddings, and Lincoln’s close friend Ward Hill Lamon to support his argument that “for a war leader whose experience in national life was minimal, in administration and diplomacy nil, in war almost ludicrous as seen in the brief Black Hawk War,” Lincoln possessed political and personal courage and sagacity (73).

In less capable hands, Rawley’s argument might have lapsed into hagiography. Instead, Rawley’s Lincoln resembles the Lincoln of many other historians: wise, witty, shrewd, calm, masterful at manipulating politics and policy. And in arguing his point, Rawley includes several subjects and issues to which Gienapp devoted less attention. Rawley provides more detail about the Trent affair,
demonstrating Lincoln’s commitment to the union cause at the expense of all else and his handling of such disparate friends and allies as William Henry Seward and Charles Sumner. Against those who argue that Lincoln stayed aloof from Congress, Rawley notes that Lincoln worked with fellow Republican Schuyler Colfax on his election as Speaker of the House in the face of Democratic and border state opposition. He spends more time analyzing Lincoln’s relationship with Grant and with the Radicals, giving the president the better of it. Gienapp renders a similar judgment but with a broad brush, whereas Rawley does it with more of an emphasis on particular issues. Both approaches work and present a richly textured Lincoln. The question is which texture the reader prefers.

Perhaps Lincoln’s most famous description of himself was his response to John Scripps’s request for his life story: that it could be captured in Gray’s line about “the short and simple annals of the poor.” Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Keneally’s contribution to the Penguin Lives series, is a short and simple account of Lincoln. The author of Schindler’s List could be expected to write the most consciously literary of these three biographies, and he did. The author of American Scoundrel, a biography of nineteenth-century wildman Daniel Sickles, could be expected to have an eye for the anecdotal or sensational, and he does.

What makes this book less satisfying to the professional historian or Lincoln student is what might make it most appealing to the general reader seeking an introduction to Lincoln. It is much less interpretive than Gienapp or Rawley. It is more complete on his personal life and less determined to hew to the traditional historical record.

Perhaps Keneally’s greatest gift is his novelist’s and ironist’s eye for detail. To read that Stephen Logan was “a compulsive whittler, and would sometimes, if not provided quickly with wood, start in on people’s furniture,” creates an anecdotal image that Lincoln would have relished, and certainly inspires bemusement at the thought of the oddities of Lincoln’s law partnerships (39). Keneally brilliantly draws a parallel when he writes, “It was now Lincoln’s turn to have a son who, as well as resembling the Todds closely, would in temperament be something of a stranger to him” (43). Keneally captures, better than the other authors, what can only be described as the basic contempt with which Lincoln viewed Douglas. His examination of the first Mathew Brady picture of Lincoln, taken when he came to New York City to speak in February 1860, reveals a man “somewhere between august and rough hewn, pos-
sessing an appearance of tentative strength but already bearing an unreachable, unquenchable sorrow in his profound eyes” (78). Besides the many well-known reasons for Lincoln to develop a friendship with Seward, Keneally notes “that Seward also had a difficult, depressive wife he could not quite figure out” (107). Given his earlier work on Sickles, he spends more time than most authors of short biographies would on Mary Lincoln’s friendship with Henry Wikoff, but it is a fascinating story nonetheless.

Yet Keneally’s book ultimately is too much of an exercise in storytelling. The interpretive prowess that Gienapp and Rawley developed over many years of writing and teaching history is not necessarily unavailable to Keneally. But his work might be described as akin to a general with his flank in the air: it needs to be better anchored. The chapters begin and end at moments in Lincoln’s life without any explanation of their historical context or significance. The book opens with his birth, which certainly makes sense, but to conclude by writing, “He had become the bloodied nation incarnate,” really is no conclusion (175). While properly bowing toward Douglas Wilson’s brilliant work in distinguishing between accounts of the prepresidential Lincoln, Keneally matter-of-factly states, “During his militia service he had an encounter with a prostitute in Beardstown and, according to another source, one in Galena” (19). That suggests a reading of the early evidence that would go beyond Wilson’s level of acceptance.

Keneally commits some unfortunate sins of omission and commission. To read of him as Abe, a political nickname, is jarring, as are misspellings of Denton Offutt and Grace Bedell. In describing Mary Owens, he takes at face value Lincoln’s self-deprecating, satirical letter to Mrs. Orville Browning about the relationship (26). Describing the emotionalism that helped inspire his speech to the Young Men’s Lyceum, Keneally writes that “in Illinois an abolitionist editor, the Reverend Elijah Lovejoy, who would become in time a hearty supporter of Lincoln, was attacked by a mob who shot him and dumped his printing press in the Mississippi,” except that of course the mob killed Lovejoy and it was his brother Owen who became a sometimes critical radical supporter of Lincoln (34). Mary disliked Herndon in part because, Keneally writes, “She learned that he had described her as a serpent”; she learned it first-hand, when he tried to praise her dancing (47). His analysis of the failed 1855 Senate race founders on his reference to Lyman Trumbull as “his fellow Whig”; not only was Trumbull a Democrat, but that was the key to Lincoln’s loss (61). To say, “The slavery issue had split the
Whigs asunder, many Southern Whigs being pro-Nebraska—that is, pro-popular sovereignty,” and that Lincoln was leery of “joining forces with Know-Nothing abolitionists” reveals a lack of understanding of the changing political forces of the mid-1850s (61–62). He includes former Democrat Norman Judd in the list of “men who shared Lincoln’s Whiggish ideas about American improvements.” Actually, Judd’s antecedents hurt him with ex-Whigs in Lincoln’s orbit (76). To explain Seward’s circumlocutions on reinforcing Fort Sumter by saying, “More of an appeaser . . .,” is too simplistic (98). McClellan’s warning that the Union was incapable of simultaneously fighting the Confederacy and Great Britain contributed to the peaceful resolution of the Trent affair, but it was hardly the only reason. He quotes McClellan’s famously nasty telegram—“If I save this army now I tell you plainly that I owe no thanks to you or any other persons in Washington—you have done your best to sacrifice this Army”—and how it “appalled even Lincoln,” except that the offending sentence never reached him; the telegrapher edited it out (121). The general who formed black regiments along the Mississippi was Lorenzo Thomas, not George Thomas. Whether Salmon Chase’s selection as chief justice was “wise . . . since Chase could be depended on to uphold the constitutionality of the administration’s reforms” is less clear to those aware of Chase’s later vote against upholding the Legal Tender Act (159). Individually, these errors or debatable points may seem undamaging, especially to the leisure reader at whom the book is aimed. Nor are more trained historians immune to error: Gienapp knocked two years off of Lincoln’s age when he went to the legislature, and Rawley described as “oblique” what seems like an obvious and well-thought-out response to Chief Justice Roger Taney’s ruling on habeas corpus in Lincoln’s first message to Congress. But Keneally’s transgressions are jarring to those who already have a working historical knowledge of Lincoln.

Yet, in a key way, Gienapp, Rawley, and Keneally agree: Lincoln certainly was, to them and to so many others, perhaps the central, most important and fascinating figure in our past. They also share a belief in Lincoln’s abilities and confidence in them. If Keneally is less analytical and detailed about Lincoln’s political and military activities, he is no less admiring.

They seem to agree in another way that stamps them as different from other recent biographers. Unlike Allen Guelzo, while they deal with Lincoln’s religion, they certainly see it as less central to his being. Unlike William Lee Miller, while they trace various turning points in Lincoln’s life and certainly see in him great ethical virtues,
they stick to a narrower point of view. And reading the three books together reveals an important divergence from David Herbert Donald’s magisterial biography. Donald begins the book with Lincoln’s declaration to Albert G. Hodges, “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me,” and notes “Lincoln’s reluctance to take the initiative and make bold plans.” Among the three authors, only Rawley mentions Hodges, and then quotes from the letter without including the quotation.¹

This difference might appear insignificant, but it reveals the interpretive divide that continues to make the study of Abraham Lincoln’s life and times rewarding and worthwhile. As simple as the details may seem, the man and his world continue not only to influence our times, but to fascinate and captivate all who take the time to examine them, just as he fascinated and captivated William Gienapp, James Rawley, and Thomas Keneally. That they differ is unsurprising; that they could compress so much into so little space is almost unimaginable. All three can be read with profit, even if Keneally’s work ultimately is less profitable than the other two. But all three of these books demonstrate beyond doubt that much remains to be said about Abraham Lincoln, many are eager to say it, and many more remain just as eager to read it.