Review Essay

The Challenge of Biography: What do they know of Lincoln who only Lincoln know?

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Multivolume biographies, heavy with expansive quotation from original documents, were once standard issue for nineteenth-century public men. Lincoln’s secretaries John G. Nicolay and John Hay needed no fewer than ten to do their subject justice.¹ In the aftermath of the First World War, such cradle-to-grave “lives and letters” were mocked as pompous, hagiographic relics of Victorianism, yet the genre has proved surprisingly enduring, at least in the Anglophone world.² Taylor Branch’s work on Martin Luther King and Robert Caro’s on Lyndon Johnson, to cite two of the best-known recent examples, are epic in scale as well as extraordinarily perceptive about their subjects.³ True to their nineteenth-century roots however, there is, on the whole, an inherently reverential quality to these works. Revisionists write short books; it is always, apparently, the admirers who produce the long ones. Michael Burlingame’s new biography of Lincoln fits this

². The critique was most associated with Lytton Strachey, whose Eminent Victorians (London: Chatto & Windus, 1918) offered an ironic and concise alternative. French, German, and Italian historians show no such affection for the big biography. Rare exceptions include the seven-volume biography of Mussolini by Renzo De Felice (an eighth volume was completed after De Felice’s death), and Hans-Peter Schwarz’s two volumes on Konrad Adenauer: Adenauer. Der Aufstieg 1876–1952 (Stuttgart: DVA, 1986) and Adenauer. Der Staatsmann 1952–1967 (Stuttgart: DVA, 1991). I am grateful to my colleague Dr. Axel Körner for our conversation on this subject.

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pattern. Weighing in at eleven pounds, this two-volume, 1,976-page work aspires to be no less than the definitive Lincoln biography for our times. And this is emphatically a work of homage as well as of scholarship, both monumental in its function and its size.

Burlingame claims that no one has published a “comprehensive” life of Lincoln since Carl Sandburg, whose magnum opus achieved huge popular success in the 1930s. Yet, Burlingame points out, Sandburg worked without the benefit of the “abundant” fresh Lincoln material that has since become available, including, most notably, the Lincoln Papers, which were not opened until 1947. It is undeniable that the study of Lincoln has been revolutionized in the past half century by newly available, or more easily accessible, sources. But the abundance of work on Lincoln also means that, compared to the scholarly context in which Sandburg wrote, Burlingame has a vastly more “comprehensive,” complex, and nuanced historiography with which he must engage. Furthermore, long as this biography is, it cannot hope to be as comprehensive in covering, for example, the critical period between Lincoln’s election and his inauguration as Harold Holzer’s recent six-hundred-page study of those four months. Similarly, readers seeking an in-depth account of the struggles of Lincoln’s early life can already turn, for example, to Douglas Wilson’s *Honor’s Voice* (1999) or Kenneth J. Winkle’s *The Young Eagle* (2001), while Burlingame cannot hope to compete, speech by speech, with the trend for microanalysis of Lincoln’s public utterances. So, in fact,


the explosion of Lincoln studies since Sandburg’s day might actually lessen rather than intensify the need for a biography of this length.

There is also the elementary but vital point that, to paraphrase C. L. R. James: What do they know of Lincoln who only Lincoln know? No man, however extraordinary, can be explained entirely from the inside out, and good biography avoids this problem by using the individual as a way of understanding in precise ways how broader social, cultural, or political forces worked. The greater number of Lincoln sources and the explosion of books and articles about Lincoln since Sandburg wrote should be regarded, in other words, as the least of Burlingame’s problems. Even more daunting for one who would write a “definitive” biography is the size and complexity of the historiography on nineteenth-century American politics, culture, and society.

Burlingame argues that Lincoln’s character and personal development are too complex to be compressed. Only a biography of this length, he suggests, can provide a holistic picture of the sixteenth president, one that integrates the distinct phases of his life, his public and his private self. Given the reticence of Lincoln to speak candidly about his “inner life” and his well-known elusive quality, these questions continue to be the central problems confronting Lincoln scholars. The claim that they can only be adequately addressed in more than one volume, however, is not immediately convincing. While its length certainly gives an encyclopedic feel to this work—a quality that will no doubt make it essential reference material—it does not in itself convey any guarantees of conviction or authenticity. There have been as many readings of Lincoln’s character and inner motives as there have been Lincoln biographers, and the complexity and persuasive-

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8. Or, as James put it, “What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?” C. L. R. James, Beyond a Boundary (1963; reprint, Duke University Press, 1993), 252.
ness of the picture painted does not seem, to me at least, to bear any relationship to the length of the treatment.

“Sandburg was a poet,” Burlingame writes pointedly, “I am a scholar” (1:i:x). Poetry, one might think, has a useful role to play in a biography of this length; it was surely the striking beauty of Sandburg’s language that carried his many readers through thousands of pages, even if his standards of referencing were not all they might have been. In contrast, Burlingame’s scholarship is manifest but his prose workmanlike. Where Sandburg would insert a flowery description of the scenery to fill a few pages, Burlingame offers up more and more of his primary sources. Indeed, to the reader who has the stamina to get through the entire book, the most obvious difference between this and shorter works is that Burlingame never uses one or two quotations to illustrate a point when he can find ten or eleven to do the job.

Yet, while there are important differences in style and method, there are also some striking similarities between Burlingame’s biography and Sandburg’s—similarities that reveal some of the strengths and weaknesses of the monumental biographical approach. Both biographers are willing to make confident judgements about Lincoln’s private thoughts, his relationships, and his inner demons. For both, the key to understanding Lincoln is the autodidacticism of his adolescence and early adulthood (“Reading helped liberate Lincoln from his backwoods environment,” writes Burlingame, “emancipating his mind and firing his ambition”) (1:35). Both biographies repay the careful reader with thought-provoking, even if not always entirely persuasive, psychological insights—some of which are half-buried under a mound of more familiar material. Both make extensive, self-confident use of Herndon’s collection of interviews with people who claimed to have known the young Lincoln. Both, moreover, are written in the heroic style; they are narratives not of Lincoln’s rise to power per se but of the emergence of his “greatness.” Insofar as Burlingame has succeeded in his stated aim of writing the definitive biography for his generation of Lincoln historians, it illustrates not only how far our understanding of Lincoln has advanced since Sandburg’s day, but also how, in some respects, it has not.

There are two sorts of questions raised by Burlingame’s book. The first are essentially methodological and are about the limitations of the sources available to understand the private as well as the public side of this complex character. The other questions are about the persistent tendency in much Lincoln scholarship, from Sandburg’s day to the present, exhibited in exaggerated form in this book, to place Lincoln
on a pedestal, sometimes in ways that threaten to distort sensible historical judgements.

Burlingame’s 1994 study, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*, made a useful contribution to Lincoln scholarship by demonstrating the possibilities of returning the focus to the experiences and inner struggles that had shaped the public figure. Stripped down to its core arguments, this biography recapitulates Burlingame’s earlier work. Consequently, one of the strengths of this biography is Burlingame’s sensitivity to the ups and downs of Lincoln’s emotional life. One of many such examples is Burlingame’s very convincing description of the new president’s sense of betrayal at the decision of Virginian John B. Magruder to join the Confederacy only three days after he’d pledged loyalty to the Union (2:139). Mostly, though, it is the traumas of Lincoln’s childhood that provide the opportunity for psychological analysis. The key to this is the “emotional” as well as “material and educational poverty” that plagued his early years. “Neither parent met his most basic psychological needs,” writes Burlingame. “Suffering from emotional malnutrition, Lincoln thought himself unloved and unlovable. To compensate, he sought in public life a surrogate form of the love and acceptance he had not known at home; by winning elections he would prove to himself that he was lovable” (1:173).

When Lincoln told Herndon in 1850 that “all that I am or hope ever to be I get from my mother—God bless her,” Burlingame does not assume—as have previous biographers—that this was a conventional paean to his long-dead mother, but that Lincoln was thinking of his genetic inheritance from his mother’s father, who, Lincoln speculated, was a member of the Virginia gentry. Burlingame writes: “Lincoln’s description of his aristocratic grandsire represents a variation of the ‘family romance’ syndrome, which causes some children to speculate that they are actually the offspring of more distinguished parents than the ones who raised them. Most people outgrow these fantasies, but some adults—including exceptional people or men with very distant fathers—tend to maintain an unusually strong sense of family romance throughout life” (1:3).

If Burlingame is right about this—and there is no way we can ever know if he is or not—it would explain Lincoln’s apparent sense that he was different from those around him, his burning ambition, and his desire to put as much distance as possible—physically, culturally, politically, and intellectually—from his father. Thomas Lincoln

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has never had good press from anyone. And Burlingame, who never pulls a punch when it comes to discussing those with whom Lincoln clashed, calls him “a classic Southern backcountry cracker . . . [a type who was famous for being] easygoing, improvident, unacquisitive, lazy, and restless. They preferred to spend their days hunting, fishing, and loafing rather than farming.” Their folkways and culture, we are told in one of the sweeping statements to which Burlingame is occasionally prone, “derived largely from northern England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall and the Hebrides” (1:9).

Burlingame has even found an explanation for Lincoln’s antislavery politics in his upbringing. Lincoln’s frustration at being, in formal legal terms, bound to his father until the age of twenty-one was a “painful experience” which, Burlingame thinks, “led [Lincoln] to identify with the slaves and to denounce human bondage even when it was politically risky to do so” (1:42). This is a startling insight, albeit in what is almost a throwaway line (Burlingame does not return to this point in his later discussion of wartime emancipation). Yet, of course, there were many reasons why Lincoln responded as he did to the issue of slavery extension in the 1850s and, insofar as his resentment at the “bondage” he experienced before his age of maturity may have been a factor, it is one that is impossible to quantify.

Much the same can be said of Burlingame’s thoughtful, but far from definitive, discussion of the important questions of why, in frontier Illinois at the height of Jacksonianism, Lincoln identified with the Whig party and made the “cultural” choices he did to refrain from alcohol and tobacco. Perhaps, Burlingame speculates, it was precisely Lincoln’s familiarity “with backwoods immorality, drunkenness, indolence, and sloth” that drew him to the Whig program of economic and cultural renovation: “He longed to see the day when that kind of world—the world of his father—would disappear” (1:72). But, of course, most others with the same background as Lincoln became Democrats. At least Burlingame directly addresses these issues, but he does not advance the discussion beyond what has already been established in the work of, for example, Richard Carwardine or Daniel Walker Howe. Nor is there anything in this biography that sheds new light on the elusive problem of Lincoln’s religious beliefs, a subject upon which Burlingame presents plenty of evidence but comes to no clear conclusion.

Burlingame—like Sandburg—makes much of the very strong evidence that the young Lincoln suffered at least two severe depressive episodes, if only in order to describe Lincoln’s later transcendence of such psychological difficulties. Lincoln’s desperate sorrow after the death of Ann Rutledge “may have been partly a result of his unresolved grief at the death of his mother and siblings,” Burlingame writes, adding that “such intense depression can lead to suicide, even among young and physically healthy people like Lincoln” (1:101). Many modern biographers have speculated about the long-term effect of losing his mother at such a vulnerable age, but Burlingame is characteristically more emphatic than others. Noting that children “often regard the early death of a parent as deliberate abandonment,” he argues that “throughout his life Lincoln feared being abandoned and was inclined to attack those who forsook their party or their principles.” Pushing the point even further, Burlingame also thinks that Lincoln’s “mother’s death evidently taught him that women are unreliable and untrustworthy” explaining his “abiding wariness of women in general” (1:27).

Part of the problem is that these forays into the “inner” Lincoln rest on such relatively sparse and contested sources. Burlingame’s *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* was one of the first works to rehabilitate William Herndon’s oral history collection after many decades in which professional Lincoln scholars had treated their reliability with deep scepticism. If anything, he is even more wholehearted in his embrace of these sources in this book. Only briefly, in a prefatory author’s note, does Burlingame obliquely acknowledge the limitations of his sources: “Many educated guesses, informed by over twenty years of research on Lincoln, appear in this biography. Each such guess might well begin with a phrase like ‘in all probability,’ or ‘it may well be that,’ or ‘it seems likely that.’ Such warnings, if inserted into the text, would prove wearisome; readers are encouraged to provide such qualifiers silently whenever the narrative explores Lincoln’s unconscious motivation” (1:xi–xii). This is a refreshingly honest acknowledgement of the uncertainties inherent in any biography, indeed in all historical writing. Burlingame is merely making explicit the usually implicit “contract” between reader and historian in which the former trusts the latter to have taken due note of all the available evidence, even if it is not all overtly discussed in the text, before coming to a conclu-

sion. Burlingame has undoubtedly earned the right, through many years of seemingly exhaustive research, to make judgments about the veracity of the material he is using. Indeed, if this book at times feels like a carefully compiled compendium of long quotations from Lincoln’s *Collected Works* and the various memoirs and reminiscences of his contemporaries, at least there can be no doubting the authority with which those sources are mined: Burlingame has edited no less than nine collections of writings, diaries, and observations by Lincoln secretaries Nicolay, Hay, and Stoddard. The assiduous scholarship upon which this book is based turns up little gems of information about Lincoln not available elsewhere. Burlingame’s careful trawling of Illinois newspapers, for example, has enabled him to identify previously overlooked pieces that seem likely to have been anonymously penned by Lincoln. These reveal the young Lincoln to be a biting satirist and an energetic player of partisan games. Burlingame’s deep knowledge of the sources also enables him to construct a persuasive argument that John Hay, rather than Lincoln, wrote the famous letter to Mrs. Bixby in 1864. (This is rather like arguing that a supposed Rembrandt painting was in fact by one of his pupils: it is interesting to aficionados, but it has no implications for our overall understanding of the man himself—though, in this case, it certainly raises John Hay’s stock.)

Perhaps Burlingame’s prefatory declaration about the guesswork that is involved in writing a biography of this kind is also a shrewd


14. The debate about whether Lincoln or Hay composed the Bixby letter has a long history, and this is not the first time that Burlingame has made the case for Hay’s authorship. See Michael Burlingame, “New Light on the Bixby Letter,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 16 (Winter 1995): 59–72.
insurance policy against critics who charge that his reconstruction of some episodes in Lincoln’s life place more weight on the sources than they can comfortably bear. The “educated guesses” that follow are indeed plentiful and, moreover, extend beyond those passages that discuss Lincoln’s inner life to a multitude of other matters of fact and interpretation. Few scholars since Sandburg would recount with Burlingame’s aplomb quite so many apparently verbatim conversations based on decades-old recollections as if they actually happened. Is it really plausible that after hearing Lincoln speak at the New Salem Literary and Debating Society, James Rutledge really told his wife that all the young man lacked was the “culture to enable him to reach the high destiny he knew was in store for him”? Or is it not rather more likely that this is what he would like to have said when he recalled the incident forty years later (1:65)?

An example like that is trivial. In some contexts, though, Burlingame’s choices about which sources to believe have significant implications for the story he is telling. This is most true of his depiction of the Lincolns’ marriage. In The Inner Abraham Lincoln Burlingame offered probably the most coruscating portrait of Mary Lincoln’s personality since Herndon. He goes even further here. “Abundant evidence,” writes Burlingame, “supports Herndon’s characterization of Mary Lincoln as a ‘tigress,’ a ‘she-wolf,’ and the ‘female wild cat of the age’” (1:201). Most of a chapter is devoted to endorsing Carl Schurz’s view that the marriage was the “greatest tragedy of Mr. Lincoln’s existence” (1:212). Mary, he writes, with characteristically precise detail, “attacked her husband with cleaning implements, cutlery and vegetables” (1:202). He considers it “likely that Mary Todd seduced Lincoln in order to trap him into matrimony” and seems to positively relish the abuse hurled at Mary, especially when she was in the White House.15

There is probably no subject in Lincoln scholarship over which opinions are as polarized as this.16 Burlingame has some powerful


ammunition on his side of the argument—the Lincolns’ marriage was, by almost all accounts, clearly a volatile one. Historians who have waded into the murky waters of this controversy can easily be accused of being overly selective about the relatively scanty pieces of evidence available (there is almost no extant correspondence between Abraham and Mary to shed light on this matter). But while Burlingame quite rightly draws attention to the tensions in the marriage, in the end his portrait lacks conviction. There is a cartoonish quality to his depiction of Mary, an apparent lack of emotional sympathy, which jars when compared to the deep sensitivity Burlingame displays towards his principal subject. If the Lincolns’ marriage was unremittingly awful, why did they take carriage rides together most evenings during the Civil War? Why did he continually express concern for her well-being? No doubt the marriage was turbulent, complex, and often very strained. Clearly there were times when her behavior embarrassed him. But that Mary offered him nothing at all in the way of emotional, practical, or intellectual support, as Burlingame seems to suggest, is unconvincing. At the very least, as Catherine Clinton has argued, there are strong reasons to see the Lincolns’ as a “political marriage” in which she was as ambitious for his success as he was. (Incidentally, Mary is not the only supporting character whose personality Burlingame dismisses rather caustically: Carl Schurz, he writes, was “egotistical,” Salmon P. Chase “haughty,” and William Pitt Fessenden “dyspeptic,” while William H. Seward had a “massive savior complex, streaked with self-pity.” Stephen A. Douglas, in Burlingame’s depiction, was mainly just inebriated.)

It is perhaps a little surprising that, given Burlingame’s view of the state of Lincoln’s marriage, he devotes no space at all to an examination of the possibility that his subject may have been anything less than vigorously heterosexual. Burlingame contributed a “respectful dissent” to C. A. Tripp’s controversial book alleging that Lincoln was “predominantly homosexual,” but there is, of course, a great deal of space between Tripp’s position and the notion that he had no homosexual experiences at all, which, one infers, seems to be Burlingame’s position. And, irrespective of whether or not Lincoln was ever physically attracted to men, Burlingame steers clear of any discussion of


what Sandburg memorably described as the “streaks of lavender” in Lincoln’s personality.19

It is a conceit of the post-Freudian age—one that would have been unfamiliar to Lincoln and his contemporaries—that the ultimate motivation for public behavior can be reduced to an individual’s psychological make-up. In Lincoln’s case, it is an approach that uncovers some intriguing possibilities, but one that only takes us so far. Burlingame has many fewer original observations about the “public” Lincoln than he does about his “private” self. When Burlingame writes that Lincoln’s problem with Radicals “had more to do with their style than with their ideology,” the sentence leaps out for its pithiness (2:550). Overall it is, in fact, surprisingly hard to identify Burlingame’s analysis of Lincoln’s political stances. Thick description tends to overwhelm the analysis. So while Lincoln’s anonymous journalism is quoted at length, there is little discussion of his use of the press, or other channels of communication, to build and consolidate his and his party’s power. Similarly, there are pages and pages of interesting anecdotes about Lincoln’s treatment of office-seekers but little discussion of the politics of patronage.

There are a few points in the biography when Burlingame’s careful research has the potential to alter our understanding of Lincoln’s politics, albeit inconclusively. An example is Burlingame’s identification of an anonymous article in the Illinois State Journal on January 24, 1861, in which Lincoln appears to soften his stance with regard to the compromise proposal to admit New Mexico as a slave state. Burlingame is at a loss to explain this apparent change of heart, speculating that “perhaps he believed that slavery could never take root in that huge territory,” a line which comes uncomfortably close to Stephen A. Douglas’s defense of his “popular sovereignty” scheme for determining whether slavery should exist there (1:749). If Lincoln did indeed change his mind on this issue, the message did not reach Seward in Washington, nor did it leak to the Republican press, so he cannot have pushed it very hard. In any case, as Russell McClintock has shown, the New Mexico statehood plan would have faced severe obstacles even had Lincoln’s alleged lukewarm support been known.20 Lincoln has always been vulnerable to the accusation that he fiddled

19. At one point, Burlingame attributes to Lincoln the description of the allegedly “aristocratic” supporters of Martin Van Buren as “ruffle-shirted Vannies” but does not comment on any possible sexual subtext in this coinage. Burlingame, 1:111.

while the Union burned, failing to understand the depths of the crisis and making speeches on the way to Washington that served only to antagonize the South further. Burlingame (like Harold Holzer) argues that, in fact, Lincoln acted wisely while those around him lost their heads. That, to put it mildly, was certainly not how most of his contemporaries saw matters.

More importantly, the startling suggestion that Lincoln may have been more willing to compromise on the critical question of slavery extension is not integrated into Burlingame’s overall conception of Lincoln’s politics, which otherwise emphasizes his increasing radicalism on all matters relating to race and slavery. One way in which this biography does embody the current generation of Lincoln scholarship is in this emphasis on his capacity for “moral growth”—nearly to the point where Lincoln almost seems to be driven by the post-Civil Rights era morality of equal rights. Indicative of this is Burlingame’s argument that Lincoln’s support for plans to colonize freed African Americans somewhere in the Caribbean or Central America was merely “tactical,” by which he intends to suggest that somehow Lincoln contrived to support these plans while not really believing in them in order to achieve a greater moral purpose (2:234–35). Burlingame’s belief in Lincoln’s moral growth suggests this conclusion in this instance, whereas in other circumstances, Lincoln’s circumlocutions appear in a different light. Everything Lincoln said about emancipation, in public or in private, defended it not only as the right thing to do but also, critically, as the only way of preserving the Union, yet Burlingame does not consider the possibility that Lincoln’s support for emancipation was a “tactical” ploy to achieve the greater good of the preservation of the Union. In other words, only when Lincoln seems to occupy political ground that does not fit into a modern, liberal moral framework is he deemed to be insincere. Taken on his own terms, it would appear that, unsurprisingly for someone of his race and background, the preservation of the American nation (with its universal mission intact) always remained Lincoln’s driving purpose. But to recognize that too explicitly would be uncomfortable for Burlingame since, like most Lincoln scholars today, the nation can only be the object of reverence insofar as it is a cipher for, or the instrument of achieving, some other morally unimpeachable, end.

I am not arguing that Burlingame should have described Lincoln’s support for emancipation as “tactical,” but that he is too ready to apply such a slippery concept to Lincoln’s support for other, less admirable, positions. There is a presentism in Burlingame’s approach that does a disservice to the romantic nationalist sensibilities of the
mid-nineteenth century. An alternative way of interpreting Lincoln’s responses to the evolving crisis over slavery would be to see him struggling—like many other Northerners—with the difficulty of balancing and reconciling competing moral and political objectives. It was not always clear to Americans of the Civil War era that preserving the nation, abolishing slavery, pursuing equal rights for blacks, and the maintaining of the rights of whites were all equally desirable, equally obtainable, and still less that they were mutually reinforcing. Choices had to be made among them, the emphasis shifting from one to another depending on the audience and the context. One could add to this list the profound ethical dilemmas about whether war was a politically and morally legitimate way of seeking to achieve any or all of these objectives, and, if it was, how far, if at all, the immense human cost of the conflict could or should be minimized. The remarkable thing about Lincoln’s “journey” (if one must use the language of self-help manuals) is the extent to which he was able to recognize how circumstances affected what was politically expedient and politically possible. That he altered his racial views during the war is quite likely—so did many other Americans—but that does not necessarily mean that any such transformation was at the heart of Lincoln’s approach to decision-making as president.

This determination to see “moral growth” in every aspect of Lincoln’s journey is a product of the implicit conceptual framework within which Burlingame—and many other Lincoln scholars—operate: the transformation from “politician” (bad) to “statesman” (good). “Like a butterfly hatching from a caterpillar’s chrysalis,” Burlingame writes, “the partisan warrior of the 1830s and 1840s was transformed into a statesman” (1:376). Burlingame’s only modification of this familiar narrative arc is to identify the pivotal moment of transformation from the partisan politician to the “statesman that the world would come to revere” not in Lincoln’s reaction to the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act but in a “fiery psychological trial” in the preceding four years. “Out of the crucible of midlife introspection can emerge an awareness of one’s own identity and uniqueness that breeds self-confidence and inspires confidence in others,” writes Burlingame self-confidently. He continues: “A hallmark of such psychological progress is an ability to overcome egotism, to avoid taking things personally, to accept one’s shortcomings and those of others with equanimity, to let go of things appropriate for youth and accept gladly the advantages and disadvantages of age. People able to meet these challenges successfully radiate a kind of psychological wholeness and rootedness that commands respect. Lincoln was such a person” (1:360).
Quoting people who were in thrall to the resonance of Lincoln’s voice (or his “aura”), Burlingame concludes that his subject emerged from his midlife crisis with “psychic radiance.” Once Lincoln passed this psychological Rubicon, it seems, he could do literally nothing wrong. Unfortunately, Burlingame is frustratingly vague about exactly what prompted this alleged personal crisis. The years after the end of his single term in Congress were a time of professional frustration, at least as far as his considerable political ambitions were concerned, but this does not appear to have prompted a depression analogous to the two well-documented sloughs of despond into which he sunk in 1835 and 1841. Instead, most of the chapter Burlingame devotes to this midlife crisis is concerned with anecdotes of Lincoln’s life riding the legal circuit. But if explaining the transformation creates its own difficulties, the principal problem with this chrysalis-to-butterfly narrative, especially couched as a journey from partisan politician to statesman, is that it obscures the many ways in which Lincoln’s shrewd—and, yes, partisan—political instincts operated when he was in the White House. Burlingame wants his hero to be driven by a clear-sighted moral compass, but Lincoln was also a tactical party leader, searching for what was right as well as what was possible in both challenging and extremely confusing conditions.

Ultimately, if this biography lasts, as Sandburg hoped his would, “across a long future,” it will be for the intrinsic scholarly value of the details that Burlingame so painstakingly amasses, rather than for the power or penetration of the Lincoln portrait it paints. Perhaps, in the end, the problem, as generations of scholars have demonstrated—intentionally or otherwise—is that Lincoln defies all attempts to constrain him in a single biography, however long. Burlingame’s painstaking scholarship certainly establishes him as one of the handful of people who know most about the extant Lincoln sources. But sometimes, it seems, too much knowledge can cloud as much as it can illuminate.

One way in which this biography most emphatically resembles Sandburg’s is in the sympathy and admiration for Lincoln that glows from every page. Lincoln, Burlingame writes, was a “model of psychological maturity, a fully individuated man who attained a level of consciousness unrivalled in the history of American public life” (2:833). The injection of contemporary psychological jargon apart, this expresses a very old view of Lincoln. John Drinkwater, an early twentieth-century British admirer, enthused that Lincoln was “in-

timately of the world, yet unsoiled by it; vividly in contact with
every emotion of his fellows and aware always of the practical design
of their lives; always lonely, brooding apart from it all, yet alien-
ated from none.”22 The romantic ideal of Lincoln is alive and well in
Burlingame’s pages too: the “children of New Salem enjoyed his
joking and playfulness as much as he did and loved him for it,”
writes Burlingame, in heart-warmingly Sandburgian style (1:83). In
the end, Burlingame writes, “Lincoln’s personality was the North’s
secret weapon in the Civil War, the key variable that spelled the
difference between victory and defeat” (2:833). This extraordinary
claim is a statement of faith that cannot be verified, especially not
by the biographical method. It is, however, the entirely predictable
culmination of these two thousand pages. The admiration for Lin-
coln and his “psychological wholeness” is not in itself a bad thing,
nor will it seem in the slightest bit jarring to many readers. In that
sense, Burlingame has indeed written the definitive biography for
his generation. Yet, such ardent enthusiasm does not aid historical
enquiry, certainly not if it is used, as in this instance, to make judg-
ements about large-scale historical processes. Historians working on
other important figures in American history—one thinks of Thomas
Jefferson—have moved beyond the stage of needing to either eu-
logize or condemn. The agenda for the next generation of Lincoln
scholars, benefiting, one hopes, from the cooling of the emotional
warm bath of the bicentennial, will be to historicize Lincoln in the
same way.

22. John Drinkwater, Lincoln: The World Emancipator (Boston: Houghton Mifflin,
1920), 1–2.