Charnwood’s *Lincoln*: Biography as Civics Lesson

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According to that noted sage of Lincolniana, Carl Sandburg, Lincoln once remarked, “It matters not to me whether Shakespeare be well or ill acted; with him the thought suffices.”1 Even the most plodding of performances would not obscure the words of Shakespeare; an attentive audience could still learn what the great Bard “thought” and taught about man in society. No mere dramatist he, Shakespeare was for Lincoln a political teacher of the highest order.2 Similarly, the Englishman Godfrey Rathbone Benson—Lord Charnwood—when researching the subject of his most famous American biography,3 found that understanding Lincoln required a thorough familiarity with his thought as found in his speeches and writings. Only then could one understand Lincoln as Lincoln understood himself.4


2. Several commentaries have been written that elucidate Shakespeare’s political wisdom, which Lincoln would have appreciated. They include Allan Bloom with Harry V. Jaffa, *Shakespeare’s Politics*; John Alvis, *Shakespeare’s Understanding of Honor*; and Joseph Alulis and Vickie Sullivan, eds., *Shakespeare’s Political Pageant: Essays in Politics and Literature*.


4. David Herbert Donald’s much acclaimed *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995) appears at first to follow Charnwood’s method: “It is, then, a biography written from Lincoln’s point of view, using the information and ideas that were available to him” (13). He then adds, however, “It seeks to explain rather than to judge.” Charnwood finds Lincoln’s words and actions lead Charnwood not only to explain but to judge Lincoln’s political life. Hence, while Donald follows Charnwood in writing a biography “based largely on Lincoln’s own words,” he does not find himself compelled to render a verdict on Lincoln the statesman as a consequence of his meditation on those words.
Given his reliance on the speeches and writings of Lincoln, Charnwood also understood that a biography of a statesman must deal in political philosophy; the biographer has no choice (if he wants to get his subject right) but to engage in some political and philosophical reflection to understand his subject’s actions in light of the circumstances of the day. Lincoln’s project for perpetuating self-government loomed so large in his life that to miss or downplay it is to not comprehend it and hence subvert the attempt at a good biography of the man and his times. In short, biography with a marked emphasis on political philosophy is legitimate when the subject is Lincoln.

Simply stated, Charnwood’s *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* tells the story of an American president whose public thoughts and deeds amounted to a grand civic lesson on the principles and practices of American self-government. Charnwood rightly notes, however, that Lincoln’s project was fit not only for the United States but for the world, which made the publication of his biography during the Great War all the more timely. To be sure, he identifies himself on the first page as “an English writer” who “must endeavor to make clear to Englishmen circumstances and conditions which are familiar to Americans.” But let us make two observations about this: First, Charnwood’s principal aim is to get Lincoln right, and so he “tells again this tale, which has been well told already and in which there can remain no important new facts to disclose.” Charnwood does not reveal any new information about Lincoln but rather amasses known facts into an interpretation of the life of Lincoln within its American context for a British audience. Second, these “circumstances and conditions” are no longer familiar to most Americans. As the introduction to the recently reissued edition of Charnwood’s biography remarks of Lincoln: “He has been revised, analyzed, and psychoanalyzed to such an extent that it has become increasingly difficult even to glimpse the ‘central fact’ that was so vividly clear to

5. According to Lady Charnwood, the biography was “conceived as a war service” and “written in the midst of the world’s agony.” Quoted in Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 200.

6. Ibid., 9. Lord Charnwood was not the first British biography of Lincoln; in 1907, Henry B. Binns’s *Abraham Lincoln* was published in London.

7. Charnwood called his *Life of Lincoln* a “consecutive account,” implying that his interpretative biography followed ineluctably from a candid consideration of the preponderance of facts known about Lincoln’s life and nation. Lord Charnwood, “Some Lincoln Problems,” *The Living Age* 307 (22 November 1920): 536 (originally printed in the *Anglo-French Review* that same year). Basler notes that the Charnwood biography was “not a new interpretation,” but one where the reader “may value as he chooses, appreciate as he chooses, but he never escapes the greatness of Charnwood’s conception.” *The Lincoln Legend: A Study in Changing Conceptions* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), 20.
Charnwood, much less to understand Lincoln fully as he understood himself.” Therefore, reading this Englishman’s biography of Lincoln would help Americans as well to understand Lincoln’s character and politics because Charnwood takes little for granted in the way of American history, choosing rather to rehearse as much of it (in one of the lengthiest chapters of the biography) as is necessary to place Lincoln in context.

Just as Lincoln, along with the American founders, understood the principles of just government to apply not only to Americans but to all mankind, Charnwood writes his biography of Lincoln to an English audience, all the while cognizant that his true audience is the same as Lincoln’s ultimate audience, the mass of mankind. As the noted editor of the Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln once wrote of Charnwood’s biography, “From its viewpoint Lincoln belongs not to one nation and one period, but to the world and to all time.” As proof of Lincoln’s universal appeal, Charnwood quotes from Lincoln’s memorial eulogy on Henry Clay: “He loved his country, partly because it was his own country, and mostly because it was a free country.” He then adds of Lincoln, “He might truly have said the like of himself.” (Lincoln once referred to Henry Clay as “my beau ideal of a statesman”). He recognizes that Lincoln’s love for his country was ennobled by his appreciation of and devotion to its transcendent principles of freedom and equality, which Charnwood calls “certain principles of permanent value to mankind.” This was no mere tradition that Lincoln venerated, but a “high aspiration” that would serve to guide his efforts to preserve the union not as an end in itself, but the means of promoting a greater good, even a good not yet actual or fully practiced but regnant in the constitutional fabric of the American regime. For Charnwood, this was the key to Lincoln’s popular appeal outside the United States and why he concludes his biography by commenting that if Lincoln “reflected much on forms of government it was with a dominant interest in something beyond them. For he was a citizen of that far country where there is neither aristocrat nor democrat.”

8. Schramm, “Introduction,” 1. The “central fact” referred to in the quotation is Charnwood’s conviction that “no man ever pondered more deeply in his own way, or answered more firmly the question whether there was indeed an American nationality worth preserving.” Ibid., 50.
11. Charnwood, Abraham Lincoln, 93, 94.
12. Ibid., 32, 326.
This is not to say, of course, that Charnwood is oblivious to or dismissive of Lincoln’s patriotism. On the contrary, he makes it the driving theme of his biography: “It is the central fact of this biography that no man ever pondered more deeply in his own way, or answered more firmly the question whether there was indeed an American nationality worth preserving.” The centrality of this theme derives from Charnwood’s belief that Lincoln’s raison d’être was the preservation of an America consistent with the founding principles as expressed in the Declaration of Independence: “To him the national unity of America, with the Constitution which symbolized it, was the subject of pride and of devotion just in so far as it had embodied and could hereafter more fully embody certain principles of permanent value to mankind. On this he fully knew his inner mind. For the preservation of an America which he could value more, say, than men value the Argentine Republic, he was to show himself better prepared than any other man to pay any possible price. But he definitely refused to preserve the Union by what in his estimation would have been the real surrender of the principles which had made Americans a distinct and self-respecting nation. Those principles he found in the Declaration of Independence.” In Charnwood’s understanding of the development of the new nation, “the very recent historical origin” of the United States necessitated that the principles of liberty and equality somehow assume the role that tradition, with “influences deep rooted in the past,” customarily played. This would require no mean effort. “The man who did more than any other to supply this lack in a new country, by imbuing its national consciousness—even its national cant—with high aspiration, did—it may well be—more than any strong administrator or constructive statesman to create a Union which should thereafter seem worth preserving.”

Charnwood’s moral seriousness in his treatment of Lincoln does justice to the moral seriousness with which Lincoln himself dealt with the problem of preexisting slavery in a constitutional republic. He practices the very thing he appreciates in Lincoln and hence displays

13. Ibid., 50.
14. Ibid., 93–94. Cf. Garry Wills’s *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), which argues that at Gettysburg Lincoln committed “one of the most daring acts of open-air sleight-of-hand ever witnessed by the unsuspecting. Everyone in that vast throng of thousands was having his or her intellectual pocket picked.” Few noticed, according to Wills, that by interpreting the U.S. Constitution and the aim of the Civil War in light of the equality principle of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln performed “a giant if benign swindle” (38). See also 37–40, 88–89, 145–47, 174–75. This implies that Charnwood has been charmed by Lincoln and hence has lost his objectivity in assessing and recounting the life of Lincoln for modern readers.
before the reader the moral questions at the heart of American self-government. A prime example of Charnwood’s close attention to the principled rhetoric of Lincoln is the section of his biography entitled “The Principles and the Oratory of Lincoln,” which begins: “We can best understand the causes which suddenly made him a man of national consequence by a somewhat close examination of the principles and the spirit which governed all his public activity from the moment of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise.”

By tracing Lincoln’s rise in politics through the salient controversies of the day, from the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and the formation of the Republican Party through the Lincoln-Douglas debates and up to his election as president, Charnwood helps the reader to understand how Lincoln’s apparent meteoric rise could prepare him to meet the secession crisis: “If, upon his sudden elevation shortly afterwards [i.e., after his 1858 debates], Lincoln was in a sense an obscure man raised up by chance, he was nevertheless a man who had accomplished a heroic labor.”

Hence, it is no surprise that what sets Charnwood’s Abraham Lincoln apart from all others is not merely its reliance on the thought of Lincoln—by way of numerous and extensive citations—but its close explication of Lincoln’s thinking against the backdrop of the social and political turmoil of antebellum America and the Civil War. In chapter 2, “The Growth of the American Nation,” Charnwood situates Lincoln’s political activity within American history as follows: “In tracing the causes which up to his time had tended to conjoin the United States more closely and the cause which more recently had begun to threaten them with disruption, we shall be examining the elements of the problem with which it was his work in life to deal.”

No lesser authority than Roy P. Basler, in an early study of the Lincoln literature, observed of Charnwood’s Abraham Lincoln, “There is a balanced proportion in the treatment of historical topics which is seldom found in Lincoln biographies; all the historical matter introduced is in direct connection with Lincoln. The hero is not buried among the facts.” Moreover, in chapter 5, “The Rise of Abraham Lincoln,” Charnwood explicitly highlights Lincoln’s debates with Senator Stephen A. Douglas as seminal events for the nation: “In Lincoln’s settled opinion this [i.e., Douglas’s] moral attitude of indifference to the wrongfulness of slavery, so long as respect was had to the liberties of the privileged race, was, so to say, treason to the basic principle of the American Commonwealth, a treason which had steadily been becoming rife and upon which it

16. Ibid., 93.
17. Ibid., 101.
18. Ibid., 19.
was time to stamp. . . . Abraham Lincoln, at this crisis of his life, did, in pursuance of his peculiarly cherished principle, forge at least a link in the chain of events which actually precipitated the war. And he did it knowing better than any other man that he was doing something of great national importance, involving at least great national risk.”

In Charnwood’s estimation, Republican leaders back east saw Lincoln’s insistence on airing the immorality of slavery as “an unpractical line to take”; nevertheless, he concludes that “to the political historian this is the most crucial question in American history.” The reader thus finds in Charnwood a biographer intent on conveying history as the participants themselves understood and helped shape it. His biography is a sympathetic reading of Lincoln and his times, not only in its admiration for his subject but also in its depiction of the key actors and events that shaped American history.

To cite another example, Charnwood quotes from Alexander Stephens’s infamous “corner stone” speech upon the adoption of a constitution for the Southern Confederacy, which reads (in part): “The prevailing ideas entertained by Jefferson and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the old Constitution were that the enslavement of the African was wrong in principle socially, morally, and politically. Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not the equal of the white man; that slavery—subordination to the white man—is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first in the history of the world based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.”

Charnwood goes on to finish his presentation of “The Case of the South against the Union” (the first of four sections of a chapter on secession), concluding with a quotation of Lincoln as a counterpoint: “I have never . . . had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence. I have often pondered over the dangers which were incurred by the men who assembled here and framed and

20. Ibid., 107. Cf. the Preface of Donald’s Lincoln: “This book is not a general history of the United States during the middle of the nineteenth century. I have stuck close to Lincoln, who was only indirectly connected with the economic and social transformations of the period. . . . I have not offered a broad philosophical discussion of the origins of the Civil War and I have not addressed the question of whether it was the first modern war. These are important subjects, but they did not present themselves to Abraham Lincoln in any practical way” (14). For the definitive argument on the importance of the Lincoln-Douglas debates to American political thought, see Harry V. Jaffa, Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

adopted that Declaration of Independence. I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army who achieved that independence. I have often inquired of myself what great principle or idea it was that kept the Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of separation of the colonies from the motherland, it was the sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but I hope to the world, for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weight would be lifted from the shoulders of all men.”

By citing verbatim the leading statesmen of the respective sides to the impending conflict, Charnwood allows the reader to form his own opinion of the merit of their arguments and the character of their actions. In particular, revealing the reasons for Lincoln’s public actions through ample use of Lincoln’s own words enables Lord Charnwood to write a biography that gives the clearest portrait of Lincoln and his statesmanship—an altogether fitting and proper depiction of one who made his living as well as his reputation by his words.

At the risk of prejudicing his own retelling of the Lincoln story, Charnwood acknowledges his bias at the outset: “Nor should the writer shrink too timidly from the display of a partisanship which, on one side or the other, it would be insensate not to feel.” Here, Lord Charnwood teaches the reader that the honest biographer is not one who feigns disinterestedness or foregoes drawing conclusions, especially when discussing “affairs and persons” so manifestly the subject of public debate worldwide. In short, Charnwood sides with Lincoln and offers his life—with its imperfections neither magnified nor obscured—as one worthy of a study that leads to admiration. While Charnwood does not present a moral biography in the tradition of Parson Weems, he does present Lincoln’s life in a way that conveys its import to freedom-loving men and women. In taking his subject seriously, he draws conclusions about Lincoln’s thought and actions that display the moral seriousness not only of Lincoln’s project but the American experiment itself. In the words of Basler (written in 1935): “This author, more than any other, successfully weighs the historical importance of each event and incident in the mass of facts, and hence the critical reader is more willing to agree with him in the end that Lincoln is to be credited for certain things and condemned for others. The credit far surpasses the condemnation, however, and the absence of any specific eulogy in the biography only leaves the reader free to phrase his own.”

Turning his disclaimer into a short lesson on writing honestly,

22. Ibid., 136–37.
23. Ibid., 19.
Charnwood adds, “The true obligation of impartiality is that he should conceal no fact which, in his own mind, tells against his views.” Thus Charnwood defends an admittedly partisan biography at the outset by announcing that his life of Lincoln will leave no stone unturned along the well-trodden path of Lincoln lore. As he remarks later in the work, “a biographer must set forth if he can the materials for the severest judgment on his subject.” This method of presentation not only invites scrutiny of Lincoln the man but of his project, offering an invitation to examine the requirements of self-government that Lincoln sought to explain and preserve throughout his public life. In short, those who seek earnestly for the unvarnished Lincoln also will find consistent arguments in defense of the equal rights to liberty that kept alive his greatest hope for the American nation.

Evidence that Charnwood’s concern for intellectual honesty was in earnest can be found in a later essay, “Some Lincoln Problems,” published in the *Anglo-French Review* in 1920. Among other “problems,” he considers the observations of two men—Illinois Senator Lyman Trumbull and Lincoln’s law partner William E. Herndon—that have left some with mixed feelings about Lincoln’s greatness. Of Trumbull, who affirmed Lincoln’s honesty and kindness but stated that “Lincoln was a follower and not a leader in public affairs,” Charnwood acknowledges, “we have to read his privately expressed opinion of Lincoln with respect.” Of Herndon’s *Life of Lincoln* (written with Jesse W. Weik and published in 1889), he says, “The observation which has often been made, that Herndon’s book would have been a valuable one if only he had had the discretion to omit some slightly displeasing details, is one against which I cannot refrain from entering a most earnest protest.” In both cases Charnwood re-

26. Ibid., 91.
27. Charnwood, “Some Lincoln Problems,” 535–36 and 542, respectively. He observes, “Naturally, however, the humble origin of Lincoln has from the first affected people in different ways, and startling instances might be given of men, who had especial reason for cherishing his true fame, but have thought his connection with very common people an uncomfortable fact to be as far as possible softened away.” Moreover, he notes with greater concern that “with an equally natural and far more estimable error of judgment, some of Lincoln’s friends have been anxious to minimize whatever elements of coarseness or of eccentricity there may have been about him, or, in view of the great healthiness of his mind, the balance of temper and sanity of judgment to which he attained, to make nothing of the dejection and acute perturbations of mind through which, upon his own evidence, he passed.” Ibid., 539. Here we see Charnwood’s precision in analysis and nobility of character, wherein even his criticism of biases reflected in others’ depictions of Lincoln is tempered with an understanding that such was, after all, only “natural.” One might even hear the faint echo of Lincoln himself—“With malice toward none; with charity for all”—in Charnwood’s gentle critique.
views the two contemporaries of Lincoln in a critical yet sympathetic light, evincing a desire to grant allegedly disparaging comments or mixed motives a fair hearing. For example, where others dismiss Herndon’s *Lincoln* as a work “destitute of veracity and animated by sheer spite,” Charnwood concludes that Herndon “believed, and believed quite rightly, that the most unvarnished presentment of any and every incident of his life or trait of his character was the greatest service that could be done to his just fame.”

At bottom we find Lord Charnwood confessing unabashedly of his own biography that “the impression which I tried to convey has become to myself more and more convincing; it is that of a high consistency—fully thought-out principles bravely and undeviatingly followed—the nobility of which is redeemed from cold-blooded and austere dispassionateness by many intensely ‘human’ touches.”

Charnwood’s own *Life of Lincoln* portrays Lincoln’s character as a display of the great good that can result from “a man with many human weaknesses” but exercising “the wise and nobly calculated opportunism which is not merely the most beneficent statesmanship, but demands a heroic self-mastery.”

While Charnwood accepts “without reserve” Herndon’s oft-noted quip—that Lincoln’s ambition “was a little engine that knew no rest”—he defines his notion of a respectable ambition by which readers can better understand the political aspirations of Lincoln: “If ambition means the eager desire for great opportunities, the depreciation of it . . . is a piece of cant which ought to be withdrawn from currency, and ambition, commensurate with the powers which each man can discover in himself, should be frankly recognised as a part of Christian duty.”

Whether Christian or classical in nature, we find a notion of ambition in Charnwood’s assessment of Lincoln that suggests an honorable alternative to the low political opportunism attributed to Lincoln by some.

28. Ibid., 541.
29. Ibid., 533.
31. Ibid., 119. Aristotle “the Philosopher” explained: “Now men do seek honour both more and less than is right; it must therefore be possible also to do so rightly.” He therefore identified the properly ambitious man as one praised “as manly and a lover of what is noble.” Moreover, in a discussion of the virtue of magnanimity or great-souledness, he noted that “men’s ambitions show what they are worth,” indicating that one takes the measure of a man by his ambitions or highest aspirations in life. *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), Book 4, secs. iv and iii, 229, 227 (and also Book 2, sec. vii, 101). An excellent presentation of the role of ambition in Lincoln’s life is found in Richard J. Carwardine, *Lincoln* (Harlow, England: Longman, 2003).
We see in a different way Charnwood’s devotion to an “unvarnished Lincoln” at the close of chapter 6, where he announces that the remaining six chapters of the biography will focus on Lincoln’s presidency and in particular the salient controversies attending his actions to prosecute the war. Interestingly enough, he says they will serve as a “tribute” to Lincoln. But note that Charnwood states that the tribute “consists in the careful examination of just those actions and just those qualities of his upon which candid detraction has in fact fastened, or on which candid admiration has pronounced with hesitancy.” In other words, Charnwood is confident that close scrutiny of Lincoln’s actions will demonstrate his greatness in spite of both too-hasty praise or blame of Lincoln during the war years.

The clarity with which Lincoln saw the relationship between “Union and freedom” is mirrored by the emphasis Charnwood places on their resolution in Lincoln’s antebellum and war-time actions, which the concluding sentence of the first chapter makes clear: “We may regard, and he himself regarded, the liberation of the slaves, which will always be associated with his name, as a part of a larger work, the restoration of his country to its earliest and noblest tradition, which alone gave permanence or worth to its existence as a nation.”

This one sentence speaks volumes about how Lincoln understood his role as president, and thus it offers to students of the Civil War an insight into why Lincoln believed the cost of war in blood and treasure worthwhile. Reflecting in the concluding chapter on the many “great deeds . . . done in the war,” Charnwood answers unequivocally, “The greatest was the keeping of the North together in an enterprise so arduous, and an enterprise for objects so confusely related as the Union and freedom.” Charnwood discerns Lincoln’s understanding of emancipation in light of the greater goal of preserving the Union, two issues tied inextricably together at the nation’s founding and whose resolution was fraught with difficulty under the prevailing federal system of national government: “It was, as we know, impossible for them in federating America, however much they might hope to inspire the new nation with just ideas, to take the power of legislating as to slavery within each existing State out of the hands of the State. . . . They reasonably believed, though wrongly, that the natural tendency of opinion throughout the now freed Colonies with principles of freedom in the air would work

32. Charnwood, Abraham Lincoln, 156.
33. Ibid., 18.
34. Ibid., 325.
steadily towards emancipation.” This comprehension of Lincoln’s project, the perpetuation of American self-government—with its aim of securing equal rights—in a manner consistent with the republican hallmark of consent, evinces Charnwood’s biography as at minimum a milestone among Lincoln biographies and still among the best ever written.

If this assessment seems too nostalgic (if not antiquated), given the additional study of Lincoln conducted these past four score and ten years since Charnwood’s biography, we cite a widely influential interpretation written over thirty years later for the reader to weigh against the Englishman. In a chapter entitled “Abraham Lincoln and the Self-made Myth,” Richard Hofstadter showed the extent to which he understood Lincoln’s twin-fold project of emancipation and union: “The Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863 had all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading.” He went on to conclude his commentary on why Lincoln resorted to emancipation during the war: “Believing that he was called only to conserve, he had turned liberator in spite of himself.…” Here we see a simplistic opposition of conservative and liberal objectives: “to bring back the South with slavery intact” (union) versus freeing the slaves at the risk of violating constitutional strictures (freedom).

The more accurate interpretation of Lincoln’s view of emancipation vis-à-vis his presidential powers can be found where Charnwood found it, in Lincoln’s reply to Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune editorial, “The Prayer of Twenty Millions”: “My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.” Charnwood cites the reply to Greeley, which is the most concise and insightful revelation of Lincoln’s war aims and as they

35. Ibid., 95. For a more detailed exploration of Lincoln’s attempt as president to secure the principles of the Declaration of Independence through the legal and political mechanisms of the U.S. Constitution, see Phillip Shaw Paludan, The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), esp. the Preface and chapters 1 and 2. Lincoln once referred to the principle of equality as the “apple of gold” that was to be adorned and preserved by the Union and Constitution, “the picture of silver.” “Fragment on the Constitution and the Union” (ca. January 1861), Collected Works, 4:169.


37. Ibid., 126 (emphasis in original).

38. “To Horace Greeley” (22 August 1862), Collected Works, 5:388.
relate to emancipation. 39 Lincoln had made it clear many times—and most clearly in his First Inaugural Address—that his duty as president (to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States”) prevented him from interfering with the domestic institutions of any state, even in the case of slavery. Charnwood assesses “the legal effect of the [Emancipation] Proclamation”: “… in normal times the President would of course not have had the power, which even the Legislature did not possess, to set free a single slave; the Proclamation was an act of war on his part, as Commander-in-Chief of the forces, by which slaves were to be taken from people at war with the United States, just as horses or carts might be taken, to subtract from their resources and add to those of the United States.” 41 He also understands and conveys the difficulty Lincoln faced in freeing slaves during wartime, with border slave states fighting for the Union and constitutional considerations to boot: “There was indeed grave danger of splitting the North in two if he appeared unnecessarily to change the issue from Union to Liberation. We have to remember that in all the Northern states the right of the southern states to choose for themselves about slavery had been fully admitted, and that four of the Northern States were themselves slave States all this while.” 42

Thus Charnwood helps the reader catch what Hofstadter and others miss: Lincoln deliberately passes over a clear opportunity to wax eloquent on the momentous occasion of emancipation precisely because his act was “a military measure” and not an ordinary exercise of his executive powers under the U. S. Constitution. 43 Charnwood keeps before the reader’s mind “Lincoln’s view of his duty as President” and thereby provides the constitutional context for Lincoln’s words and actions regarding emancipation. In short, “He had been able to free the slaves, partly because he would not hasten to this object at the sacrifice

42. Ibid., 229. As of 1 January 1863, slaves held in Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri were not declared free because these states were loyal to the Union; as such their domestic institutions stood under the same constitutional protection during the war as prior to the war.
43. For the definitive account of the defining act of Lincoln’s presidency, see Allen C. Guelzo, Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004). Guelzo explains that the Emancipation Proclamation’s “leaden legalese” reflected Lincoln’s desire that his wartime emancipation withstand judicial scrutiny and invite public support for its legality. See also Mark E. Neely Jr., The Last Best Hope of Earth: Abraham Lincoln and the Promise of America (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 113–16.
of what he thought a larger purpose." The civic lesson that is Lord Charnwood’s Abraham Lincoln, in other words, continues apace.

We belabor this point over emancipation because of what it tells us about Charnwood the biographer as well as Lincoln the president. This discussion shows how well Charnwood did his homework, for he explains Lincoln’s thinking by using Lincoln’s words as much as possible, a study of statesmanship that has as much to do with the logic, eloquence, and precision with which Lincoln spoke as with Charnwood’s desire to get it right. For example, he by no means came to his understanding of Lincoln’s emancipation policy without considerable reflection on Lincoln’s disdain toward the abolitionist cause. Witness Charnwood’s caution: “This side of Lincoln’s doctrine is apt to jar upon us . . . and it requires an effort to sympathize with Lincoln’s rigidly correct feeling—sometimes harshly expressed and sometimes apparently cold.” Nevertheless, the effort pays off in a deeper understanding of Lincoln’s political philosophy, which connected the natural equality of all human beings with their practical security through the consent of the governed: “. . . the sure way and the only way to combat slavery lay in the firm and the scrupulous assertion of principles which would carry the reason and the conscience of the people with them; . . . [H]is forbearance with slavery cost him real pain, and we shall misread both his policy as President and his character as a man if we fail to see that in the bottom of his mind he felt his forbearance to be required by the very same principles which roused him against the extension of the evil.”

Charnwood sees Lincoln drawing two apparently contradictory conclusions from “the very same principles”: namely, that the principle of human equality stands both as the ideal toward which a free society will strive (the equal protection of their natural rights) as well as the means by which that society will secure it (government by the consent of the governed). Lincoln could not strike at American slavery where it then existed without violating the “consent” mechanism—the U.S. Constitution—wherein the American people vested him with limited authority on the subject. By the same token, the same equality principle that justifies government by the consent of the governed mandates that government exists to secure the equal rights of the governed, thus indicating the end to which consent ought to be directed. Charnwood thus endeavors to make sense of any apparent inconsistencies in Lincoln’s thoughts or actions, especially with regards to this tension between liberty and consent: to wit, Lincoln’s understanding

44. Ibid., 325.
45. Ibid., 96.
of what he had power to do under the American constitution versus how an ideal society and government would operate.

While this reader is persuaded that Charnwood tells the Lincoln story more accurately than most biographers to date, it would be remiss not to call attention to a few apparent flaws and omissions. First, we consider his judgment that Lincoln’s oratorical skill was due mostly to his “personality” or character (what the Greeks called ethos) and not his arguments or reason (logos). Charnwood repeats a newspaper editor’s comment upon hearing Lincoln’s 1854 speech at Peoria: “Beyond and above all skill . . . was the overwhelming conviction imposed upon the audience that the speaker himself was charged with an irresistible and inspiring duty to his fellow men.”46 To Charnwood’s credit, the biography belies the aforementioned statement, for (among other places) on the very next page he lauds the reasoning ability of Lincoln: “He puts himself in a position in which if his argument were not sound nothing could save his speech from failure as a speech.” In fairness to Charnwood, this is a minor slip given his overwhelming comprehension of Lincoln’s political project and appreciation for the difficulties with which Lincoln had to contend through his public utterances.

Some might argue that Lincoln’s First Inaugural address, to which Charnwood devotes only two paragraphs in a biography marked by careful attention to political principles, should have received more considered attention given the events that soon follow. We observe that Charnwood is not writing a book on Lincoln’s political philosophy per se; he need only convey enough of Lincoln’s mind to fill out his thought and character for a biography. It was enough for Charnwood to summarize the argument of the inauguration speech and to conclude his comments with a quotation of its memorable, last two paragraphs. As for the Gettysburg Address, Charnwood is content to cite it in full, but he reserves explication for other sections of the biography that dealt more directly with Lincoln’s political philosophy.

Charnwood cites only one other speech in full, the Second Inaugural Address, which he follows with Lincoln’s brief commentary on the address (in his letter to Thurlow Weed): where Lincoln’s own words would tell, Charnwood was content to stay in the background. But in lieu of his own interpretation of the speech, Charnwood notes the religious imagery therein and then offers his own assessment of that most enigmatic characteristic of Lincoln: his religion or piety. “Probably no other speech of a modern statesman uses so unreservedly the language of intense religious feeling.”47 Earlier in the biography, Charnwood

46. Ibid., 102.
47. Ibid., 314.
had observed Lincoln’s close familiarity with the Bible, and he now devotes full attention to its significance for Lincoln’s personal life and statesmanship. Charnwood sketches his unorthodox approach to faith, as compared with the Christianity practiced by churchgoers of his day, but concludes: “This man had stood alone in the dark. He had done justice; he had loved mercy; he had walked humbly with his God. The reader to whom religious utterance makes little appeal will not suppose that his imaginative words stand for no real experience. The reader whose piety knows no questions will not be pained to think that this man had professed no faith.”48 The allusion to Micah 6:8 makes clear Charnwood’s belief that Abraham Lincoln was no ordinary saint, but then again, his was no ordinary faith: “. . . and now through four years of unsurpassed trial his capacity had steadily grown, and his delicate fairness, his pitifulness, his patience, his modesty had grown therewith. . . . For perhaps not many conquerors, and certainly few successful statesmen, have escaped the tendency of power to harden or at least to narrow their human sympathies; but in this man a natural wealth of tender compassion became richer and more tender while in the stress of deadly conflict he developed an astounding strength.”49

Nevertheless, we note that even Charnwood nods, for the closing paragraph of his biography seems to downplay Lincoln’s statecraft. He observes, “No political theory stands out from his words or actions; but they show a most unusual sense of the possible dignity of common men and common things.”50 While Lincoln’s rise to the nation’s highest office from the most modest of origins certainly elevated the dignity of the common man in political life, one would be hard pressed to miss the consistency and perception with which Lincoln thought and acted upon political principle. Charnwood begins his last sentence with the supposition, “If he [Lincoln] had a theory of democracy,” which seems to this reader’s mind to be answered clearly and overwhelmingly in the affirmative by the rest of Lord Charnwood’s biography. Charnwood perhaps paid the highest compliment to Lincoln’s writing when assessing his debates with Stephen A. Douglas for the U.S. Senate: “Passages abound in these speeches which to almost any literate taste are arresting for the simple beauty of their English, a beauty characteristic of one who had learned to reason with Euclid and learned to feel and to speak with the authors of the Bible.”51 Charnwood elaborates his as-

48. Ibid., 316.
49. Ibid., 316 and 326.
50. Ibid., 326.
51. Ibid., 100. Charnwood later remarks, “in official Proclamations (concerning days of national religious observance) he could wield, like no other modern writer, the language of the Prayer Book. . . .” Ibid., 316.
essment of Lincoln’s debates with Douglas in the aptly titled section, “The Principles and the Oratory of Lincoln”: “In expressing the result of thought so far deeper than that of most men, he achieved a clearness of expression which very few writers, and those among the greatest, have excelled. . . . But if in comparison with the acknowledged masterpieces of our prose we rank many passages in these speeches very high—and in fact the men who have appreciated them most highly have been fastidious scholars—we shall not yet have measured Lincoln’s effort and performance. For these are not the compositions of a cloistered man of letters, they are the outpourings of an agitator upon the stump. The men who think hard are few; few of them can clothe their thought in apt and simple words; very, very few are those who in doing this could hold the attention of a miscellaneous and large crowd.”

Here, Charnwood not only proposes setting Lincoln’s pre-presidential speeches next to the best prose works of the English language, but he reminds the reader that Lincoln’s “treasure of clear thought” was produced in the midst of the “strain of electioneering” and for the approbation of mass audiences! What more could one ask of a political thinker of the highest rank?

To his credit, Charnwood remarked of his biography just a few years after its publication that he did not sufficiently acknowledge Lincoln’s statesmanship: “I think I hardly emphasized enough his claims to what may be called a philosophic statesman.” In that article, Charnwood countered those who denigrated Lincoln as a political “follower” and “trimmer” with his own mature estimation: “There is indeed no alternative to this relatively disparaging view of him (as at the highest a second-class statesman, a shrewd and a conscientious opportunist and nothing more) except the extreme opposite view which ascribes to him an originality, an undeviating consistency, and a philosophic grasp of facts in relation to a deep thought-out principle, such as few others, if any, of the world’s great statesmen have shown. This latter is my own view.” We surmise that perhaps Charnwood re-read his own biography, in addition to revisiting Lincoln’s speeches and writings, and came to understand that more of Lincoln’s statesmanship could have been elucidated for readers of his Life of Lincoln. In our estimation, though, the good Lord Charnwood’s first effort to chronicle the life and times of Abraham Lincoln stands with nary a peer precisely for its clarity and didacticism in presenting Lincoln as man and statesman. We take note that Charnwood’s biography was written more than forty years prior to the publication of Basler’s Collected Works of

52. Ibid., 101.
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Lincoln, which to this writer’s mind makes the Englishman’s portrayal of Lincoln all the more prescient in its accuracy.\textsuperscript{54}

After seeing The Merchant of Venice played by the most famous American actor of the day, Edwin Booth, Lincoln commented: “It was a good performance, but I had a thousand times rather read it at home, if it were not for Booth’s playing. A farce or a comedy is best played; a tragedy is best read at home.”\textsuperscript{55} No ghost from the grave is needed to tell us that Lincoln’s life was no comedy, and hence we do well to understand it as Charnwood presents it: a life of words and deeds to be read and re-read, as Lincoln did his favorite Shakespearean plays, for insight into political principle and practice. While Lincoln’s speeches and writings give us the clearest picture of his intellect and character, Lord Charnwood’s biography is a close second. Commenting on Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, Charnwood identifies Lincoln’s peculiar genius: “Here is one of the few speeches ever delivered by a great man at the crisis of his fate on the sort of occasion which a tragedian telling his story would have devised for him.”\textsuperscript{56} On this occasion, like so many others, Lincoln’s greatness derived in part from his ability to write and play his own part in the great American odyssey that was the Civil War—an ability captured eloquently by Lord Charnwood in what he called his Life of Lincoln.

\textsuperscript{54} Such was the confidence of Lord Charnwood in the resources then available for Lincoln research as well as the resultant picture they portrayed of Lincoln, that at the beginning of his biography he comments, “there can remain no important new facts to disclose.” Charnwood, Abraham Lincoln, 9. He died in 1945, eight years before the publication of the authoritative work of Basler on Lincoln’s speeches and writings. In his Lincoln Legend (a book published in 1935 based on Basler’s dissertation), he highlighted Charnwood’s biography as “the best combination of criticism and admiration yet to appear” (19). In his 1952 Lincoln biography, Benjamin P. Thomas, an assistant to Basler in his editing of the Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, also praised Lord Charnwood’s biography: “That is still an excellent book, particularly in its delineation of Lincoln’s character and its analysis of the reasons for his actions.” Abraham Lincoln: A Biography (New York: Random House, 1952; reprint, New York: The Modern Library, 1968), 524 (and Preface). Note Thomas’s decision to adopt Charnwood’s title for his own biography, which indeed replaced Charnwood’s as the Lincoln biography to read for the next quarter century.

\textsuperscript{55} Carl Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln: The War Years—II, 4:319. Edwin Booth was the older brother of John Wilkes Booth, soon to be most infamous American actor of the day.

\textsuperscript{56} Charnwood, Abraham Lincoln, 316. Given Lincoln’s fondness for Shakespeare, it is no coincidence that his own speeches resonate with the stately insight and clarity of the great Bard himself. In the words of Charnwood, “The comparative rank of his oratory need not be discussed, for at any rate it was individual and unlike that of most other great speakers in history, though perhaps more like that of some great speeches in drama.” Ibid., 314.
Charnwood paid additional tribute to Lincoln’s public and private character in the *Anglo-French Review* essay, written a few short years after the publication of his great biography, with this excerpt: a testimony of his sure grasp of the moral and political grandeur of Abraham Lincoln: “Any student of politics who now looks carefully through Lincoln’s speeches, mostly delivered in heated controversy on the stump, from 1854 till his presidency, interpreting them here and there by his few recorded confidential utterances and by those phrases of his later speeches which most evidently bear the stamp of long-settled conviction, can with fair ease construct out of them a practical philosophy of the problem then before Americans, which can be expressed substantially in Lincoln’s actual words, and which Lincoln had evidently formed for himself when first he came forward as a leader at all. One may or may not agree with it in every point, but of its profoundly original quality, or its moral dignity, of its intellectual grasp, and of its fulness of suggestion in regard to political and moral problems of all time, there can be no doubt.”