Review Essay

Everybody’s Second Choice

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How much is there left to say about Abraham Lincoln? In 1936 the distinguished scholar James Garfield Randall, in the midst of writing his four-volume life of the sixteenth president, posed a question to his fellow historians that, given the number and range of studies that had been published over the three quarters of a century since Lincoln’s death, “Has the Lincoln Theme been exhausted?” His answer was no, there was much more to learn, much more material to consult, and new directions to consider.1 Randall’s answer has been confirmed since. Library shelves buckle under the number of full biographies of the man as well as focused examinations of various aspects of his life, about his political activities, attitudes, and accomplishments, about his friends and colleagues, and about crucial moments that deserve studies of their own. The respected Abraham Lincoln Bookshop in Chicago, an extraordinary trove of Lincolniana, lists about ten thousand printed items (some sources suggest even more) in its inventory.2 Two further examinations of the same question asked by Randall—by Mark A. Neely Jr. in 1979 and Matthew Pinsker in 2009—reported on the continuing flood of material.3 The range of the studies is wide—they cover every conceivable subject and include books about the places in Illinois where Lincoln lived, even volumes that pinpoint where he was and what he was doing on most days of his life. Nor has there been a lack of full biographies. In recent years

2. Founded by Ralph Newman, the Abraham Lincoln Bookshop has been a treasure trove for students of Lincoln both amateurs and professionals.
David H. Donald, one of Randall’s graduate students, wrote a superb single-volume life, as did Allen Guelzo and the British scholar Richard Carwardine, while Michael Burlingame’s multivolume life adds new depth to the list.\(^4\) Several theme studies, for example ones by William C. Harris and Eric Foner—the former on Lincoln’s rise to power in the 1850s, the latter focusing on his long and persistent commitment against slavery—have added fresh insights and new ideas.\(^5\) Those, and a range of other such works, follow a long tradition of Lincoln scholarship that covers the ground and sometimes overwhelms those trying to master it all.

We know a lot. But there still seems to be more to say. The culmination of Lincoln’s pre-Civil War career was the election of 1860, and it too has received much attention as part of larger studies by such leading scholars as Allan Nevins, David Potter, and Don Fehrenbacher of Lincoln’s activities in the 1850s, as well as in biographies of other politicians including his rivals for the nomination.\(^6\) But since Emerson Fite’s monograph published in 1911 and Reinhard Luthin’s study published in 1944, there have been few additional examinations focused specifically on the contest that brought Lincoln to power.\(^7\) Michael Green’s volume, part of The Concise Lincoln Library series, retells the story of that election in just over one hundred pages tracing its background, the fight for the nomination, the campaign, and its culmination on election day. His focus is on Lincoln set within the larger political universe of party development and the battle over the extension of slavery. The details, outcome, and significance of the election are well reported in the literature from which Green draws. Of course scholars have not always agreed on many aspects of the Lincoln story. How committed was he against slavery and its expansion? Who supported him when he ran? What was his relationship to the nativists and the abolitionists?

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Was he more or less radical than some have suggested? Professor Green knows the recent (and past) literature about Lincoln’s political life and works his way through what others have said to fashion his work. He wants “to combine informative and diverse points of view into a short readable narrative and analysis of how Lincoln won the election of 1860” (ix). He draws as well on the extensive published collected works of the candidate.\(^8\)

Little known outside his state at the beginning of the 1850s, the long-shot Lincoln rose from an often frustrated local politician to lead the Republican party in the critical contest that brought him and his party to power. In addition to retelling the story, Green stresses Lincoln’s sustained, vigorous involvement in his drive for the nomination and in the campaign that followed. Lincoln the political animal is a well-known figure in the literature, but his close involvement in the race for his party’s nomination and in the campaign to win are perhaps not as implanted in people’s memories. In winning the nomination he emerged as the moderate candidate between the alleged radicalism of William H. Seward and Salmon P. Chase on the one hand and the old-style conservatism of Edward Bates on the other. Through his well-received major speeches and his debates with Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln became sufficiently well known to emerge as “everyone’s second choice” for the party’s nomination. Given the various weaknesses of his rivals for the nomination and the hesitations of various party blocs about the leading candidates, he won though.\(^9\) It took much effort and skill to accomplish, and he reached the top of the Republican ticket largely by his own efforts.

In the campaign his close involvement continued. He had the party tread carefully so as not to lose the support of those who preferred his rivals. To Green the central facet of the story was Lincoln’s commitment to his party and its principles combined with his ambition, his shrewdness, and his tactical sense, all of which he brought to the campaign through constant contact with his managers—David Davis and Leonard Swett—and his ability to mend fences with rivals and forestall the real danger of splits and divisions among party blocs. As Green points out several times, Lincoln’s activities were contrary to established practice; in 1860 presidential candidates were not supposed to campaign, to make stump speeches—one of the most important election weapons of the era—nor involve themselves directly

\(^9\) “Everybody’s second choice” is the title of Green’s third chapter.
in management and direction, but to leave matters to his supporters. Lincoln, however, was never loath to engage with the needs of the campaign. Most emphatically, we are reminded that all of this was in pursuit of both a personal and ideological goal. Lincoln, Green writes, had “a moral commitment to stopping the spread of slavery, a sense of political realities, and the ability to negotiate between them with men of different views” (64).

Where does Green’s study fit into the corpus of Lincoln scholarship? The length of the study means, of course, that complexities are often smoothed over, matters undeveloped, and conclusions not as fully argued as they deserve to be. But that is in the nature of the series of which this is a part. Beyond that, his is essentially a leadership study focusing on the decision makers at the top. We never stray far from campaign headquarters or Lincoln’s home in Springfield. The prize was the voters, but they do not appear very much here. At the end Green’s explanation for Lincoln’s victory is focused largely on the behavior and mistakes of others. Like most historians he focuses on the men at the top, on a mix of elite behavior such as the support he received from the previously reluctant powerful editor Horace Greeley and the important campaign mobilization activities by the Republican Wide Awake Clubs. He does draw on the close voter analysis of the election by William Gienapp, who makes the critical point that in addition to former Whigs, defecting Democrats, and a large number of new voters, Lincoln attracted nativist voters, many of whom had supported the Know Nothings four years before.10 At the end of his account, Green comes back to the candidate: “All in all . . . Lincoln’s greatest asset was himself.” He “benefit[ed] from his reputation and image” and “demonstrated deftness as a political manager” (111).

Green largely succeeds within the boundaries of his defined task. There is always room for a brief treatment of a singular moment in American history, especially one that is rooted in absorbing the existing scholarship on the subject and reporting it well. Readers looking for a short account will get a useful introduction to understanding a complex, and ultimately victorious, highly intelligent and committed politician.