Review

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In assessing the Bancroft Prize—winning work of one of America’s premiere historians, the natural tendency is simply to throw up one’s hands and say, “Kudos.” What else is there to do? One could ferret out modest factual issues simply to justify the function of reviewer, but upon reflection this fine book offers ground for substantive comment. The Fiery Trial illuminates the crucial aspect of Lincoln’s career, his place within the broader antislavery enterprise. Surprisingly, few modern works zero in on this central topic, which gives this work its larger importance. In length and sophistication, this book is targeted at the literate general public, rather than just historians. The author suggests as much on several occasions. A 336-page book normally doesn’t qualify as short, but in the case of Lincoln studies, the description applies. The book should be broadly accessible, and one can easily imagine professors assigning it to undergraduates with profit. The focus and clear writing style make it appropriate for that purpose.

Foner’s evident goal of outreach has certain implications for the Lincoln literature. In his introduction, Foner explains that he avoided most debate with other scholars’ work, to engage general readers and avoid an “extremely tedious” narrative (xxvii). He does suggest that he is skeptical of “self-referential” psychological or abstract intellectual and moral interpretations of Lincoln, at least in terms of the issues that we ought to care most about. Foner instead seeks to “return Lincoln to his historical setting” amid the backdrop of a mass popular movement against slavery (xvii). Most professional historians will find this emphasis on context congenial, and few will find much to criticize in the book as a whole. Still, they would probably have preferred a more explicit critique of the Lincoln literature, at least in the footnotes, which are notably sparse in editorial commentary. Without specific discussion of the historiography, it is difficult for non-Lincoln specialists to get a handle on what precisely the contribution here is, because insights are scattered throughout the narrative of Lincoln’s life.
That said, there are themes in the literature Professor Foner generally downplays. We hear little about the timeless quality of Lincoln’s thinking, or his political choices as the fruit of internal moral reflection, and talk of his greatness is limited. I read this as a contextualized pushback against those who want an uncomplicated, heroic Lincoln. Foner is less than awestruck by several of Lincoln’s best-known writings; the Emancipation Proclamation is couched in “dull, legalistic language,” as Foner observed (241). This book is also not interested in Lincoln’s personality, except as it influenced his attitude toward slavery, which might be seen as an implicit judgment on other approaches. And Foner seems skeptical of emphasizing Christianity or religion in general as central to Lincoln’s prewar evolution, suggesting that here too the field is plagued by special pleading; Foner flatly concludes that “religious doctrine played little role in his political outlook” (85). Because scholars often downplay his uncomfortable beliefs, Foner offers up a deromanticized Lincoln.

“I admire Lincoln very much,” Foner nonetheless observes, and the point is to tell readers what his accomplishment really was (xx). Foner apparently believes that at this political moment, one can explain Lincoln’s views on slavery fully, contextualizing them amid his less appealing racial views to a general audience without effacing his achievements. In this respect the book is unlike James Oakes’s recent Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, which depicts Republicans in Congress as relentless opponents of slavery but barely treats discussion of northern attitudes toward race as germane. Historians should prefer the realism of Foner’s approach, rather than depicting it as 1960s-style Lincoln-bashing. Foner offers a bracing look at Lincoln’s ideas on race, in sufficient detail to let them sink in. For example, Foner discusses racial politics in frontier Illinois, demonstrating that Lincoln’s views were mainstream in a state that long maintained vestiges of slavery. There are eleven references to the Illinois Black Laws in the index. This recitation is relevant, and it was startling to realize that I’d never seen anyone else emphasize the implications. Lincoln seldom challenged racism per se, probably because his own views were not that progressive. Even Lincoln’s most egalitarian rhetoric in the “House Divided” speech and similar orations Foner thinks more emphatic than intended. Nor does Foner explain away the awful “I am not nor never have been” statements of the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Lincoln never really spoke much about race except when it endangered his wider political project.

In keeping with this emphasis, as Foner notes in his introduction, this book spends an unusual amount of time on colonization, in part
because other scholars have been “uncomfortable” with the implications (xx). Foner demonstrates how significant an idea it was to Lincoln, both before and during the war. His discussion of the border-state Blair clan in this context is instructive. Foner’s recitations of midwar colonization efforts in modern Belize are equally compelling, because they suggest that Lincoln maintained a personal interest in the topic after emancipation. His closest collaborators in the cabinet, like Seward and Stanton, thought the idea crazy, but Lincoln only gradually backed away from it—and the increasingly unpopular Blairs too. The implication is that Lincoln genuinely believed that voluntary colonization was a good idea. Few Lincoln biographies spend this much time on the subject, and I think the topic repays Foner’s attention.

Even on slavery, Lincoln’s limitations are evident. Before the 1850s, what drove him were political ambition and Whig convictions, along with his overriding belief in the rule of law. Foner’s Lincoln is no abolitionist, nor is he even a Radical Republican. He had few close black contacts. Occasionally as a successful lawyer he helped masters get their human property back, and he seldom assisted runaway slaves in court. He repeatedly counseled obedience to the Fugitive Slave statutes. He, like most Americans, never thought the prewar Constitution authorized interference with slavery in the states where it existed. Nor did he place that much emphasis in his speeches on the evils of slavery that many would stress nowadays: the breaking up of families, and the sexual abuses endemic to slavery. In Foner’s words, Lincoln discussed slavery “as an abstraction, a violation of basic principles of self-determination and equality, not as a living institution that rested on day-to-day violence” (85).

Despite all this, Foner admires Lincoln. On the core issue of the injustice of slavery, Lincoln is rock solid, surprisingly so given his background. It seems that after the Kansas-Nebraska Act, this conventional Whig politician became persuaded that slavery’s spread threatened everything good about America. The point of slavery was enforced labor, and for Lincoln, nothing could make that right. Everything he wrote in private backs up that conviction, and his distaste for slavery went beyond the territorial expansion issue. He really believed in the founding fathers’ vision, or at least the version of it that he cared to emphasize. His Whiggish enthusiasm for free enterprise and economic growth was transformed into antislavery zeal. Lincoln thought that everyone should have a right to work hard and succeed, as he had from a disadvantaged background. He remained ambitious and politically agile, but he invested these traits with the higher intent of saving the country from slaveholder
domination and moral ruin. His racial limitations and support for colonization came, in large part, from his desire that nothing interfere with this core, overriding goal.

Like most modern scholars, Foner is impressed with how far Lincoln progressed on race during the war. No one can deny Lincoln’s free-soil intransigence during the secession crisis, though Foner’s account suggests it may have resulted from his underestimation of the secessionist groundswell. Foner offers a perceptive critique of Lincoln’s behavior during the war, emphasizing the factors pushing him toward a decisive move on slavery. There were certainly aggressive egalitarians pushing him toward abolition, and they criticized him vigorously. Lincoln’s public position as president was different; his role was to turn the battleship of policy government and public opinion, but he and his Radical critics were all engaged in a common antislavery enterprise. Thus Foner argues that Lincoln’s bureaucratic intervention was crucial, especially the Emancipation Proclamation itself, which changed the nature of the war and the nation that survived it. Foner emphasizes the pressure that African Americans brought on Lincoln, through running away and aiding Union forces, and volunteering in vast numbers the moment they got the opportunity. Foner thinks that “Lincoln’s own racial views seemed to change,” in large part as a result of heroic black military service (256). He finally stopped talking about colonization and started thinking of extending the franchise to some blacks.

Again, the emphasis here is on political context, and no one around is better qualified to provide it than the author of Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men. Few are so able to situate Lincoln relative to the social thought of the Republican Party. This pattern is evident at the end of the book as well, in the effective contrast with Lincoln’s successor, Andrew Johnson. The author of Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution contends that Lincoln would never have sought confrontation with the Republican Congress or abandoned freedpeople to their former owners. Nor would Lincoln have looked kindly on southern Black Codes, given that they limited economic freedoms in the same ways that made slavery abhorrent to him. Foner imagines that had Lincoln lived, the Reconstruction settlement might have featured Federal protection of civil rights and limited black suffrage, and Lincoln might have been able to make it work. This is speculation, but it is plausible, which suggests how different Lincoln’s leadership was from that of his successor, and how important his personal intervention was.

So, all in all, it is time to simply add one more commendation to the flood of favorable commentary. Historians applaud this work,
and for excellent reason: it is the best short, modern study of the decisive aspect of Abraham Lincoln’s career. The interesting tension is Foner’s attempt to sell a contextualized, accurate Lincoln to scholars outside the historical profession. Also, one wonders whether the literate public is as grown-up as Professor Foner believes or, conversely, whether other political progressives will be as willing to come to a favorable evaluation.