Review

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It’s not easy to infer what Richard Brookhiser hoped to accomplish in this three-hundred-page volume. The author of eight books on the founding fathers, he puffs his current offering on Lincoln as unique, noting that other studies have acknowledged Lincoln’s “interest in the founding fathers and how he looked back to them,” but “here, for the first time, a historian of the founding looks ahead to Lincoln” (9). This claim seems dubious at best. Many historians, including specialists on the founding era, have explored in depth what Brookhiser calls “the afterlife” of the founding fathers during the nineteenth century.¹ In any event, Brookhiser’s book focuses squarely on Lincoln, not the founders, and indeed on how he looked back to his eighteenth-century predecessors for guidance. The subtitle of the book might suggest that the author intended a biography of sorts. However, Brookhiser is quick to explain in his preface that he is offering neither “a full-dress biography” nor a comprehensive “history of his times” but rather “the history of a career, and the unfolding of the ideas that animated it” (8). He walks his readers through Lincoln’s professional and political experiences, sometimes at a leisurely pace and in somewhat haphazard fashion, with a focus on the statesman’s supposedly meaningful encounters with the fathers in his life.

Indeed, Brookhiser’s distinctive approach reflects his larger belief that “Lincoln’s life, like any life, can be read as a series of engagements with his fathers” (267). For Lincoln, there were at least three such fathers or sets of fathers. First was his biological father, Thomas Lincoln, from whom Lincoln inherited much more than he was aware

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¹ Among the significant studies omitted from Brookhiser’s bibliography are, for instance, George B. Forgie’s brilliantly provocative cultural history of the afterlife of the founding fathers (during what he defines as a “post-heroic” era) in *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), and more recently, Francois Furstenberg’s *In the Name of the Father: Washington’s Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Penguin, 2006).
of or willing to acknowledge, including the character traits of honesty and temperance. But he rejected this father as a model for his own life and its guiding values, instead seeking sufficiency in surrogate fathers, the handiest and most appealing of which were the founders of the Republic, the last of whom were rapidly exiting the national stage during Lincoln’s formative years. Once Lincoln as a young lad read Mason Locke Weems’s best-selling *The Life of Washington*, according to Brookhiser, he was hooked. From that point forward, George Washington was “inside” him as a kind of moral and political gyroscope guiding him into the future (33). The influence of other founders soon followed, with Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson taking center stage, in Brookhiser’s reckoning. Reading Paine’s works on religion during the 1830s taught Lincoln eighteenth-century deism (which he apparently transcended by the end of his life) and above all the valuable skills of a “mocking humorist” (58). But it was Jefferson, largely through his words in the Declaration of Independence, who influenced the mature Lincoln most profoundly. Effectively ignoring Jefferson’s later-in-life policy prescriptions for the geographical diffusion of slavery, Lincoln during the 1850s placed all emphasis on the “sheet anchor” of Jefferson’s first principles, grounded in the natural rights paradigm, that unambiguously condemned human slavery. By the time Lincoln ran for president in 1860, the founders were so “woven into his life” that they appeared everywhere, in his thought, speeches, and even jokes (171). Only toward the very end of his life, amid a horrendously sanguinary Civil War, were these adopted fathers edged aside in Lincoln’s consciousness to make way for an even higher father, God “the Almighty” at the center of Lincoln’s second inaugural address, a testament on the meaning of the war that revealingly makes no mention of Washington or his cohort.

The core argument of Brookhiser’s selective and eclectic intellectual biography is that Lincoln’s grasp of the founding fathers was essentially right. He correctly understood their first principles and was therefore able to draw from their eighteenth-century wisdom the powerful guiding touchstone for his political present. Thus Brookhiser’s Lincoln emerges as the ultimate admirable conservative, a wise statesman who sought vital nourishment from “the dead” and America’s revolutionary past during a time of unprecedented national crisis. Of course, Lincoln was hardly alone among his contemporaries in his search for sustenance from that past, but what most notably distinguished him from his great rival Stephen Douglas was an understanding of the founders on a level of first principles that Douglas ignored or was oblivious to. At issue during the protracted Lincoln-Douglas
encounter of the 1850s were “the two men’s portraits of the founders, and of their own self-portraits as founders’ sons,” which became nothing less than “a fratricidal contest over which of them was the Revolution’s legitimate heir” (142). Lincoln decisively won that political contest because, in Brookhiser’s view, he understood the founders as they would have understood themselves and he was exceptionally well prepared to make a persuasive case. When the crisis over Kansas erupted in 1854, as Brookhiser so aptly puts it, “all the elements of Lincoln’s mind and personality, which had lain about like engine parts in a workshop, finally came together into something coherent and ultimately powerful.” Making use of “humor, logic, and eloquence,” each trait now purged of the “grossness, rigidity, or bombast” that had sometimes characterized a younger Lincoln’s speeches, the Springfield lawyer was more than ready to explain the founders—correctly and eloquently—to their crisis-ridden descendants (111).

There’s nothing terribly wrong with Brookhiser’s read on these matters.2 Still, some anomalies and missed opportunities are worth noting. First is Brookhiser’s emphasis on Paine as a founding father. He is hardly the first or only historian to note the importance of Paine’s *Age of Reason* in shaping the young Lincoln’s religious consciousness during his years in New Salem; but in what sense can Paine be considered a founding father of the American republic unless the term is loosely applied to anyone who played a role in the independence movement and Revolutionary settlement of the 1770s and 1780s? Moreover, the writings of Paine that appear to have influenced a young Lincoln came not from the era of the American Revolution or the adoption of the Constitution but from the radical swirl of the French Revolution during the 1790s, well after Paine had exited the American scene. Brookhiser acknowledges Paine as “an eccentric founding father” who “sits a little uneasily” among the pantheon of founding heroes, but by the early nineteenth century, none of Lincoln’s contemporaries regarded Paine as a founding father (51). There is no evidence that Lincoln ever placed Paine in the same pantheon with Washington and Jefferson. Paine’s influence on him, such as it apparently was, cannot be understood or interpreted in this context.

Indeed, Brookhiser’s approach to considering the specific influence of individual founders on Lincoln seems curious and at least a little misguided. If Paine can’t fit into that interpretive context, other

genuine founders appear not to have influenced Lincoln at all—John Adams, James Madison, and even Benjamin Franklin, for instance. Brookhiser acknowledges that given Lincoln’s deep commitment to developmental economics, he should have been interested in and influenced by Alexander Hamilton. But the founder of the nation’s financial system instead appears to have remained largely invisible to Lincoln, who drew his economic sustenance from a second-generation figure born during the Revolution, his “beau ideal of a statesman,” Henry Clay. Brookhiser’s larger point, it seems, is not that Lincoln was directly influenced by specific founders but that he absorbed and embraced the larger universe of core Enlightenment principles and values that had guided their collective experience. Although Lincoln clearly emphasized specific fathers in his political speeches (though never Paine), a more fundamental and important challenge for scholars and students remains: can we understand and explain how this largely self-educated son of illiterate backcountry farm folk became so powerfully connected to a rapidly eroding eighteenth-century universe of moral and political experience?

Here is where the lack of depth in Brookhiser’s approach and research wears on the reader. To emphasize the effect of Weems’s well-known Life of Washington is convenient, especially since Lincoln himself testified to its influence on him as a young boy, but there may be a much deeper and more interesting story that Brookhiser never touches. Strong evidence suggests that amid the rapidly proliferating print culture of the 1820s, the young Lincoln encountered the founders and their Revolution through a wide range of sources. It is likely, for example (as Brookhiser acknowledges in a page note), that he became familiar during his Indiana years with another, quite different biography of Washington, David Ramsay’s The Life of George Washington. Ramsay actually participated in the Revolution, and his biography, in its sophistication and complexity, makes Weems’s offering seem like a children’s coloring book. Moreover, Ramsay’s biography included many documents that would have given Lincoln direct exposure to the founders and the larger world of the Revolution, and it concluded with an explicit call to the youth of America to emulate its quintessential eighteenth-century hero—a Weemsian ending, in other words, but with much greater depth and context, utterly devoid of the fabricated silliness found in Weems. Another example of a work Lincoln almost certainly encountered during his Indiana years is William Grimshaw’s popular History of the United States, which offered a quintessential Enlightenment view of the origins of the American Republic and the character of its leaders who, led by Washington, subjected their
dangerous passions to the sovereign authority of reason. Perhaps most intriguing in Grimshaw’s history was its linking of an emerging American republic to the enlightened spirit of commerce, new geographical knowledge rooted in astronomical discoveries, the advance of civilization through print, and the larger spirit of “improvement.” These broader Enlightenment themes are almost eerily reflected in Lincoln’s mature thought and subsequent career far more than what he might have gleaned from Weems’s account of the Battle of Trenton.

In sum, Brookhiser’s approach may prevent him from exploring a relevant larger theme—that, through broader access to the proliferating print culture of the 1820s, Lincoln encountered and internalized America’s revolutionary past and its enlightened culture, one fundamentally at odds with the rural backwoods honor-based society that surrounded him during his formative years. This story is much richer than speculation about which parts of Weems must have resonated with Lincoln and placing everything in the context of Lincoln’s alleged search for surrogate fathers.

Given Brookhiser’s eclectic approach and the lack of depth in his research, Lincoln scholars and experts will likely find little that is fresh in *Founders’ Son*. Less experienced readers looking for a sound, accessible introduction to Lincoln’s life and career, however, will be hard-pressed to do better, especially given Brookhiser’s admirable ability to explain even very complicated matters of narrative historical context so directly, clearly, and succinctly. And all readers, no matter how deep their prior knowledge of Lincoln or his times, should find inspiring the historical figure whom Brookhiser brings to life in this book. He tells us in his preface that he intends his biography to serve as training “in thinking, feeling, and acting” by offering readers a model of responsible engagement with America’s founding fathers and their first principles (9). Considering our own troubled, often frighteningly unstable world of the twenty-first century, I couldn’t agree more with this assessment of Lincoln’s enduring relevance.