Review Essay

Indiana Insider and Sociological Outsider
Perspectives on Lincoln

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In *Everybody’s History* Keith A. Erekson examines the activities of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society—“the Southwestern”—which thrived in the 1920s and lasted into the 1930s. The leaders of the society and most of its members lived in the “Pocket,” eight counties in the southwestern toe of the state. As did many such local societies, they regularly met to tell the stories of the pioneers of the region. Their enterprise, however, had a special focus because those pioneers (often society members’ own ancestors) had known, or could have known, Abraham Lincoln. Between the ages of seven and twenty-one—after spending his earliest years in Kentucky and before he rose to prominence in Illinois—Lincoln lived in Spencer County, Indiana, which bordered the Ohio River. “For one-fourth of his life,” as Erekson puts it, “Lincoln felled Indiana trees, worked for Indiana farmers, learned from Indiana neighbors, and told Indiana jokes” (4).

In 1920 John E. Iglehart, an Evansville lawyer, initiated the “Lincoln Inquiry” of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society. The society would “reclaim” Lincoln for Indiana because it believed that Indiana had been unjustly overshadowed by Kentucky and Illinois in Lincoln biography. (Similarly, Erekson later wrote on Indiana “Losing Lincoln” to its neighbors.)

Not only would the Inquiry illuminate the environment of Lincoln’s youth, it would also correct the dismal picture of frontier Indiana

conveyed by such works as Edward Eggleston’s *The Hoosier School-Master* (1871). In the context of Lincoln biography, the Inquiry indirectly took issue with the evidence collected by William H. Herndon, Lincoln’s law partner. For Chauncey F. Black, the ghostwriter of Ward Hill Lamon’s biography (1872), Lincoln was “a diamond glowing on the [Indiana] dunghill.” For Jesse W. Weik, in *Herndon’s Lincoln* (1889), Lincoln had risen to the presidency from the “stagnant, putrid pool” of backwoods Indiana (4, 25).

Iglehart and other members of the Southwestern adamantly objected to this view of Lincoln’s boyhood surroundings. In particular, they challenged former Indiana Senator Albert J. Beveridge, whose study of Lincoln’s years in Indiana was based on Herndon’s evidence. In *Abraham Lincoln, 1809–1858* (1928) that evidence is cited as “Weik MSS.” That material was acquired by the Library of Congress in 1941 and denominated the Herndon-Weik Collection. Today, it is most readily accessible in *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln.*

After Lincoln’s assassination, Herndon was the first biographer to collect evidence about him from his contemporaries and their children in southern Indiana. By the 1920s and 1930s, however, there was little information about Lincoln that their descendants could add. Although the Inquiry kept alive family stories about Lincoln, it mainly sought to collect information about Lincoln’s “environment” in southern Indiana between 1816 and 1830. The society thus emphasized the “context” of Lincoln’s early life.

Erekson spotlights the Southwestern’s effort to picture pioneer life in the Pocket in a positive way. At the same time, he is obliged to slide over the contributions of earlier biographers because members of the Southwestern simply did not have access to the Herndon-Weik collection, if they even knew about it. Thus it is not Erekson’s book but William E. Bartelt’s “There I Grew Up”: *Remembering Abraham Lincoln’s Indiana Youth* that lays out the relevant Herndon-Weik material.

Erekson’s title, *Everybody’s History,* points to the gap in historical reading and writing between amateurs and professionals, between those for whom history is an avocation and those who practice history as an occupation, between, as it were, the laity and the priesthood of the historical world. On the professional side, James G. Randall, the leading Lincoln biographer of his generation, articulated that division.

According to Randall, “the hand of the amateur has rested heavily upon Lincoln studies.” In contrast to Randall, who complained that “Lincoln is everybody’s subject,” Erekson celebrates the Southwestern for approaching the past as “everybody’s history.”

In Erekson’s presentation, the Southwestern attracted not merely a few academic historians but a host of people “from all walks of life.” The society “used cutting-edge technology to engage a variety of audiences.” By working together (despite squabbles within their ranks), they exemplified “a new model of historical practice” (5–6). How exactly the activities of the Southwestern were “new” and “cutting edge” is not clear, but Erekson, by delving into the records of the society, has shown that the Lincoln Inquiry was at least an enterprise to be reckoned with. In those records, mainly kept in collections at the Indiana Historical Society in Indianapolis and the Willard Library in Evansville, Erekson finds the names of more than five hundred participants, and in an appendix of his book he lists by name 540 members of the Southwestern for the period 1920 to 1939. Inasmuch as most of the members lived in the Pocket, with about 40 living elsewhere in Indiana and a scattering in other states, the society was primarily a local entity. In *Lincoln in American Memory*, Merrill D. Peterson referred in passing to members of the Southwestern as a parcel of “Hoosier patriots,” nothing more. But Erekson’s thorough research has at last given the Lincoln Inquiry a definite place in Lincoln historiography.

Iglehart was the first and most assertive president of the Southwestern. Before turning to history, he was for half a century a trial lawyer, his clients including a railroad corporation—first the Evansville & Terre Haute and later its parent company, the Chicago & Eastern Illinois. Although he never served on the bench, as did his father, he was routinely addressed as “Judge” Iglehart, apparently as a mark of respect. As chair of the Evansville Centennial Historical Commission, Iglehart selected “over three hundred names, representatives of old families in Evansville” and appointed “over thirty committees” to research subjects in the city’s history. World War I, however, brought this initiative to an end.

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Erekson’s book is a history of the Southwestern, not a biography of Iglehart, but it is built on the mass of correspondence, written and dictated memoranda, and other papers that Iglehart left behind. He drew up an annual “outline of work,” or research agenda, for members to carry out, and he expected them to present their findings at the group’s meetings. Assigned to speak about his ancestors, a banker in Boonville complained that “Judge Iglehart has been ding-donging me to prepare this paper for quite a while” (29). As a member from Mt. Vernon remarked, both in good humor and in admiration of Iglehart’s leadership, “he has made us read thousands and thousands of pages of pioneer history. . . . He has cajoled us, he has scolded us, he has even used his corporation methods to win his points. But always and always he has inspired us.”

“Iisn’t Mr. Iglehart funny?” the Southwestern’s archivist wrote to his successor as president. “This Society is his very own child and he can not bear to see it wander one inch out of the straight and narrow path.”

Iglehart continued to dominate the society after Thomas de la Hunt took his place as president. Suspecting that de la Hunt, a wealthy socialite from Cannelton, had appropriated another’s research for his weekly newspaper column, “The Pocket Periscope,” Iglehart scuttled a plan to publish a collection of those articles, at which point the two ceased speaking to each other (37, 45). Roscoe Kiper, a Boonville judge, a state legislator, and the society’s third president, further roiled the waters by prohibiting the publication of its papers, pending his plan to publish his own definitive history of Lincoln in Indiana (121–22). It is one of the strengths of Erekson’s book that he does not gloss over these and other feuds within the group but describes them in detail. As the same time, he describes—indeed, he celebrates—the Southwestern’s “framework for hundreds of Hoosiers to do history together” (23).

The next president, Bess V. Ehrmann, sought to smooth over the split between Iglehart and de la Hunt. A high-school drama teacher, she mounted the historical pageant “When Lincoln Went Flatboating from Rockport” in her hometown. She also compiled the only book to emanate from the Lincoln Inquiry, _The Missing Chapter in the Life of Abraham Lincoln_, a book that recent biographers have used to

8. Deidré Duff Johnson in 1928, quoted in Keith A. Erekson, “Alternative Paths to the Past: The ‘Lincoln Inquiry’ and the Practice of History in America, 1880–1939” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2008), 71. This work, as revised, became _Everybody’s History_.
supplement the Herndon-Weik collection. Ehrmann’s compilation includes such material as a paper by William Fortune in 1925 based on his notes in 1881 of conversations with Lincoln contemporaries. It also includes a list that Erekson combines with other sources to form a lengthy bibliography in his own book, “Papers, Publications, and Works of the Lincoln Inquiry.”

Ehrmann paid tribute to Iglehart for insisting that Lincoln’s life in Indiana had to be written by “the children and grandchildren” of those who knew him and by their descendants, not by “outsiders” who never spent more than a few hours or days in Spencer County. Albion Fellows Bacon captured the Southwestern’s perspective on this point: “Great Lincoln, neighbor of an earlier time, / The world your manhood claims; to us alone / Belongs your youth. We reach back eager hands / To clasp your own.” (64) (As biographies of Bacon and Fortune attest, both were prominent Hoosiers in their day, but their interest in the Lincoln Inquiry was incidental.) Ehrmann added to her book a paper by J. Edward Murr, a Methodist circuit rider in southern Indiana who began his own “Lincoln Inquiry” in 1892, and who, like her, discounted the writings of outsiders who made only “hurried and ever hasty visits” to Spencer County.

Another notable figure in the Southwestern was its treasurer, the sculptor George H. Honig. In Rockport, seventeen miles from Lincoln’s boyhood home, he spearheaded the creation of the Lincoln Pioneer Village, a cluster of log buildings representing the Lincoln family cabin as well as a church, a schoolhouse, and a few other structures with which Lincoln was associated. Built in the mid-1930s, mainly with federal grants, Honig’s village, located in a Rockport park, remains a Lincoln attraction, although the more common destination of Lincoln travelers is the Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial, which includes the grave of Nancy Hanks Lincoln.

The Southwestern was a voluntary organization of unpaid amateurs, but its members were eager to have their works published. Between 1922 and 1929 the Indiana Centennial Commission, reorganized in 1925 as the state’s Historical Bureau, printed in its Bulletin an assortment of the society’s papers. Each issue of the Southwestern’s Proceedings appeared as an “Extra Number” of the Bulletin, separate from the monthly issues, which included information about historical societies throughout the state. Although the special and intermittent publication of these

12. Ibid., 85, 88.
Bulletins made them difficult to catalog and cite, Erekson pays scrupulous attention to their bibliographical complexities.

Erekson’s book is also careful to chart the ups and downs in the relations between the trained historians of the state and the amateurs of the Southwestern. Ready to praise the Southwestern’s grassroots enthusiasm for history, the professionals in Indianapolis hesitated to put their undocumented writings into print. Christopher B. Coleman’s writings illustrate this ambivalence. A grandson of Stephen T. Logan, Lincoln’s second law partner, Coleman grew up in Springfield, Illinois, and earned degrees from Yale, Chicago, and Columbia before taking the reins of the Historical Bureau in Indianapolis. Coleman praised the Southwestern at one of its meetings: “I have always regarded it as akin to a stroke of genius” to have undertaken the Lincoln Inquiry. Led by Iglehart, the Inquiry had “enlisted a score of keen and willing workers” who have “contributed powerfully to the revisions of our interpretation of Lincoln’s personality and development.” Yet Coleman also reminded his audience that the agency he headed “has to have standards of publication. . . . We like to have every statement buttressed by reference to the source from which that statement came, the document upon which it is based.”

Lack of documentation limited the number of the Southwestern’s papers to appear in the Indiana History Bulletin, and the group was virtually ignored by the Indiana Magazine of History, a more academic journal edited by historians on the Indiana University faculty. Except for the Magazine’s list of papers presented at meetings of the Southwestern, nine of which had been printed in the Bulletin, the Magazine did not notice the Lincoln Inquiry until 1926, when a reviewer complained that Iglehart’s essay on “The Environment of Abraham Lincoln” contained “practically no reference to source material or documents.” Iglehart had taken note of “a number of men more or less prominent” in southwestern Indiana in the Lincoln years, but “in most cases it is impossible to point out any immediate connection between these men and Abraham Lincoln.” Yet historians at Indiana University never subscribed to Eggleston’s caricature of the state’s

14. Coleman’s remarks are in Indiana Historical Bulletin 6, Extra No. 3 (August 1929), 16, and ibid., 3, Extra No. 1 (December 1925), 66, each partly quoted by Erekson (83, 52).
pioneers or to Beveridge’s distillation of Herndon’s sources. “Nothing could be further from the truth,” James A. Woodburn wrote, than to describe frontier Indiana as “settled by an inferior people, an outlandish folk, steeped in ignorance, illiteracy, boorishness, immorality, degradation and crime.” On the contrary, as Logan Esarey explained, Indiana pioneers included an educated and cultured “aristocracy,” a large and respectable middle class, and only a small lower class of illiterate ruffians.16

For an assessment of Lincoln’s Indiana environment from writers of national stature, Iglehart reached out to Ida M. Tarbell, a leading journalist and the best-known Lincoln biographer of the period. In 1895 Tarbell’s picture of Lincoln’s boyhood surroundings was not encouraging. Drawing on reports of “A Hoosier” (Anna O’Flynn of Vincennes), whom Tarbell’s publisher, S. S. McClure, had hired, her picture of Lincoln’s boyhood surroundings was rather dismal, not unlike accounts based on Herndon. Spencer County was “dull, commonplace, unfruitful.” Its towns showed “no signs of energy or prosperity.” Its farms were primitive. “Thomas Lincoln did well to leave Indiana.” By 1924, however, Tarbell saluted Iglehart for providing “a better basis for judging of the caliber” of the leading men in southwestern Indiana “under whose indirect influence at least” Lincoln would have come. In particular the “solid work” of the Lincoln Inquiry brought to Tarbell’s attention not only John A. Brackinridge and John Pitcher, local lawyers with whom Lincoln is said to have “read law,” but also Lincoln’s remark, according to his friend Leonard Swett in 1886, that he had “read every book within fifty miles of his home” in Spencer County. Such traditional evidence, to which Tarbell alluded without explicitly accepting, pointed to Lincoln’s “intellectual awakening” in Indiana. However valid the evidence, Tarbell’s gracious support of Iglehart’s efforts, documented in their correspondence on file at Allegheny College, assured him that the Lincoln Inquiry was on the right track.17

No less important in supporting Iglehart’s perspective was his correspondence with Frederick Jackson Turner, an immensely influential American historian, who served on the faculty of the University of

Wisconsin until 1910, when he migrated to Harvard. Iglehart was particularly enamored with Turner’s landmark essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893), which he read in a collection of Turner’s essays (1920). By applying “Turner’s abstract national thesis” to the pioneers of southern Indiana, the Lincoln Inquiry, with Iglehart’s guidance, found a means “for projecting historically significant content” onto the group’s ancestors (91). Iglehart affirmed his allegiance to the “Turner Doctrine” in letter after letter, and Turner conscientiously kept up his side of the correspondence. When, for example, Iglehart complained that historians on the East Coast had neglected the western movement, Turner (on September 9, 1928) pointed to a host of studies of the West, many stemming from his own seminars, written by faculty in New England colleges. (That Turner would carry on such an extensive correspondence with Iglehart, as with many others, provides another explanation, beyond those noted by Richard Hofstadter, for Turner’s inability to add to the slim body of his own writings.)

Iglehart, however, was frequently at odds with most professional historians, from John Oliver and Harlow Lindley, Coleman’s predecessors in Indianapolis, to Louis A. Warren, William E. Barton, and Albert J. Beveridge, the leading Lincoln specialists of the period. When, for example, he tangled with the Historical Bureau over what to publish, he resented its “contemptuous and condescending” use of “the power and money of the state.” To deal with that “rivalry” he had “to give battle and fight for the independence” of the Southwestern. Seeing the outcome as favorable, he declared that he had “never won a more signal victory” than “in defending the right” of the society “to do its work in its own way.”

Moreover, as blacked-out passages in Iglehart’s letters indicate, he “came close” to imagining the existence of a “conspiracy” of the Lincoln fraternity “to Warrenize and Bartonize and Beveridgize the Indiana field.” But “Iglehart’s colleagues dismissed his conspiracy theory” (124). Then in his seventies and early eighties, his suspicions seemed to reflect not only his argumentative bent, shaped by decades at the bar, but also his pride in guiding the Lincoln Inquiry. Milo M. Quaife, editor of the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, complimented

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19. Iglehart to the Executive Committee of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society, December 8, 1924, Iglehart Papers; Iglehart to Tarbell, May 1, 1925, Tarbell Papers, Allegheny College Archives, Meadville, Pa.
Iglehart for devoting his “declining years to a noble historical crusade” to present Lincoln’s Indiana past in a positive way. As Erekson puts it, the Southwestern and its leader stood up against the view that Lincoln’s Indiana boyhood was “merely a way station among illiterate and uncouth Hoosier yokels before his fortuitous escape to Illinois and destiny.”

Erekson’s book skillfully gives the Lincoln Inquiry a place in Lincoln historiography. It seems apparent, however, that the Inquiry itself did not make any major contribution to Lincoln biography. Time after time, Erekson writes that Lincoln scholars “scooped up” or “picked up” discrete findings of the Inquiry, yet he is not at all specific (7, 38, 77, 87, 137, 159). The “buzzards and hyenas,” as Iglehart called them (83), had rather slim pickings. Lacking specific discoveries, the Inquiry had to turn its attention to Lincoln’s “environment.” This widened the search and, indirectly, expanded the potential sources for Lincoln biographers; it “contextualized” Lincoln’s life in Indiana, but it did not add to the documented evidence regarding Lincoln from 1816 to 1830 that is collected in the relevant pages of *Lincoln Day by Day.*

As Erekson concludes, “the biographies of hundreds of pioneers and their families were never brought together into a social or community history of southern Indiana.” The papers of the Lincoln Inquiry never led to a volume on a par with Paul M. Angle’s history of Lincoln’s Springfield (159).

In 1932 Louis A. Warren made a start in that direction with “The Environs of Lincoln’s Youth,” a paper presented to the Abraham Lincoln Association in Springfield that apparently went unnoticed in southern Indiana. “One of the crying needs of Lincoln literature,” Angle wrote in 1946, after the Lincoln Inquiry was no more, was a study of Lincoln in Indiana comparable to Warren’s work on Lincoln in Kentucky. Not until 1959 did Warren’s *Lincoln’s Youth* meet that need.

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Lincoln’s life in southern Indiana can never be as fully documented as his life in New Salem and Springfield, nor is it as important, but Keith Erekson’s study of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society clearly brings to light a significant effort to give Indiana a place in the story. In addition, he sees in the Southwestern an interesting example of “everybody’s history” in which amateurs in the Pocket did history both together and in relation to professional historians elsewhere. Taken as a whole, his book suggests the potential for similar studies of Lincoln organizations in Illinois as well as across the nation. Would it not be interesting, for example, to contrast Iglehart’s direction of the Lincoln Inquiry to Logan Hay’s leadership of the Abraham Lincoln Association, to compare the contributions of Warren and Angle to Lincoln scholarship, and to measure the impact of Tarbell, Barton, and Beveridge on our understanding of Lincoln in Indiana and Illinois?

It is easy to be critical of Jackie Hogan’s *Lincoln, Inc.* Her book is not a Lincoln biography, not a history of Lincoln and his times, not even a survey of Lincoln in American memory. It is rather a string of observations about “selling” Lincoln in present-day America. As she explains (with disarming circularity), “This book is not so much about Lincoln as it is about us” (1). Hogan’s premise, as she often repeats, is simple: “the stories we tell ourselves about Lincoln are really stories of who we think we are and who we want to be as a nation” (83 and see 2, 86, 90, 153).

Hogan’s “three-year foray into the world of *Lincoln, Inc.*” (157) is mainly concerned with the topics reflected in the title of her first book, *Gender, Race, and National Identity* (2009). That volume discusses aspects of race and gender in Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, just as *Lincoln, Inc.* is mainly a platform for the same topics as linked to Lincoln.

Hogan became interested in Lincoln when she migrated from the University of Tasmania, where she obtained her Ph.D. and became a naturalized Australian citizen, to Bradley University, in Peoria, where she teaches sociology. She was struck first of all by the ubiquitous “commercialization” and “commodification” of Lincoln, aspects of “the Lincoln industry” that open her book. A Lincoln bobble-head doll, sold for $12.95 and pictured on the cover, symbolizes this worn-out observation.

Hogan next traveled to major historic sites associated with Lincoln, paying particular attention to the “little white lies” that curators are said to palm off on tourists when, for example, they appear to represent a symbolic Lincoln cabin as the “real thing” (23). The point behind such deceptions in Lincoln tourism is simple: “make the tourists happy, and they will spend more money” (25). But are tourists so gullible? Perhaps, but is there not a touch of humor in the business of “selling” Lincoln? See, for example, Andrew Ferguson’s *Land of Lincoln: Adventures in Abe’s America* (2007) or, better yet, A. J. Liebling’s classic dispatch from Springfield in the *New Yorker* (1950).

For a discussion of Lincoln scholarship, another “branch of the Lincoln industry” (6), Hogan examined twenty well-known biographies [164]. Ten titles are spread out between 1866 and 1957, one appeared in 1977, and the last nine are clustered between 1993 and 2006. Although Hogan’s sample is not at all “statistically representative,” she apparently coded “more than 10,000 pages of text for recurring quotations, anecdotes, and themes” (31). She then put the totals into tabular form, creating an assortment of bar graphs. This gives the endeavor a scientific aura, however shaky its foundation. The books are simply too dissimilar to be compared in this way without threatening the collapse of the whole house of cards.

Hogan’s historically minded readers are likely to be most surprised by the “wacky representations” (her words) of Lincoln in fiction. Television and film may not be quite so imaginative (or so ridiculous) as fiction, but the chapter about these genre provides a diverting interlude in the book. Under the heading “What Would Lincoln Do?” Hogan comments on present-day political uses of Lincoln. In 2008, for example, Lincoln became Obama’s “unofficial running mate” (78). But Hogan is less interested in politics than in gender and race, the themes of her first book. “Perhaps nowhere,” she opines, “is Lincoln’s current role as an icon of legitimacy clearer than in contemporary debate over such heated social issues as homosexuality and abortion” (83). To construct a pro-life Lincoln, she writes, abortion opponents would translate Lincoln’s declaration, “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong,” into “If abortion is not wrong, nothing is wrong” (87–88). As for blacks, Hogan refers to “copious evidence of Lincoln’s views of colonization, miscegenation, and innate racial differences” (120).


Alas, she neglects to trace Lincoln’s evolving commitment to black equality.

To get a handle on how Lincoln is taught, Hogan attended a number of teacher workshops and examined schoolbooks on Lincoln. Although a sample such as a collection of children’s books in a local library is “not statistically representative,” it provides “insights” into the didactic uses of Lincoln (175). Hogan includes bar graphs to show that Lincoln worked hard and loved books. She then asserts that women and minorities are underrepresented in textbooks.

Race and gender become even more prominent in Hogan’s comments and charts about Lincoln exhibits in museums. In such exhibits, “the voices of women and ethnoracial minorities are seldom included” (127). The next step in such a politically correct book is to assert that museums “quite clearly serve the interests of the ruling class” (128).

In her final chapter, Hogan provides sketches of four “anti-Lincolns” (Stephen A. Douglas, George B. McClellan, Salmon P. Chase, and Mary Todd Lincoln), who, when compared to Lincoln, of course elevate him. She also refers to several women and blacks, such as Sojourner Truth and Billy the Barber, who in her view unfairly receive less attention in Lincoln biographies than do his secretaries, Nicolay and Hay. Although “the Lincoln narrative” has become “more inclusive” in recent years (156), it seems beyond belief that it will ever be turned so upside down.

As Hogan remarks, Lincoln, Inc. “will no doubt rankle traditional scholars” (10). Yes, indeed. What’s more, the gap between her approach and more balanced studies of Lincoln is exacerbated by the conclusion of each chapter in which, as a sociologist, she provides an “outsider’s perspective” on the subject. Her points in those pages, even more than in the book as a whole, fail to add to our knowledge either of Lincoln or of ourselves.