Review Essay

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Most of what we know about Abraham Lincoln reflects his public life after 1854, and especially his presidency. Literature on the period prior to his election to the Illinois legislature in 1834 is notably thin, a reflection of the paucity of family records and of his not having served previously in public office. Major biographies such as David Donald’s Lincoln (1995) illustrate that, as only about 3 percent of his text deals with the pre-Illinois legislature years. Similar patterns appear in earlier biographies by Benjamin Thomas and Stephen Oates. The most recent biographer of note, Richard Carwardine, allocates even fewer pages—just two of slightly more than 300 pages. A notable exception is William Herndon and Jesse Weik’s Herndon’s Life of Lincoln, published in the late 1880s, which is based on extensive interviewing that Herndon conducted in Indiana and Illinois shortly after Lincoln’s death. The biography became in many respects the foundation for an approach to the inner or “real” Lincoln that to this day has its supporters—notably David Donald and Douglas Wilson.

Works on the Kentucky and Indiana years, moreover, are few and far between. Louis Warren’s Lincoln’s Parentage and Childhood: A History of the Kentucky Lincolns Supported by Documentary Evidence (1926) and Lincoln’s Youth: The Indiana Years, Seven to Twenty-One, 1816–1830 (1959) constitute the most extensive studies of his life prior to the Lincoln family’s departure for Illinois in 1830. Both volumes, especially the second, continue to have their defenders. Warren, for example, presents a glowing image of Thomas Lincoln and his son’s relationship with him—one from which most recent biographers have distanced themselves (though not Richard Lawrence Miller or Kenneth Winkle in The Young Eagle: The Rise of Abraham Lincoln [2000]). In Miller’s book, though, Thomas Lincoln disappears from the narrative after his son leaves Macon County in the late winter of 1831. One of the most appealing chapters in Michael Burlingame’s The Inner World of Abraham
Lincoln (1994) is “I Used to Be a Slave: The Origins of Abraham Lincoln’s Hatred of Slavery,” which describes his experience working for his father. Another chapter attributes his overweening ambition to the absence of paternal affection. William Lee Miller’s Lincoln’s Virtues: An Ethical Biography (2002) is especially persuasive in describing what Lincoln, as compared with his peers in Spencer County, Indiana, was not—fisherman, hunter, rowdy, Democrat, and lover of farm work. Unlike boys his age, moreover, he was an avid reader and writer.

Among studies of Lincoln in Illinois before his marriage, which are also scarce, by far the most thoughtful is Wilson’s Honor’s Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln (1998), which focuses on the development of his “rock-solid ability to keep his resolves once they were made,” for his “hard-won resolution . . . would undergird his performance as president. And that would make all the difference” (323).

So where does Richard Lawrence Miller’s volume fit in this body of literature? In the first place, the reader will find no historiographical essay, either in the preface or in the notes and list of sources. Miller does, though, offer plenty of asides in the text and the notes, letting the reader know his opinion of sources cited, and in his bibliography he provides annotation for some, but not most, of the books he lists. (And some works, like those of Burlingame and William Lee Miller noted above, are not included.)

The scope of this book is 1809 to 1834. The stated purpose is reconstructing “the hidden world of Abraham Lincoln” by sorting through “a mass of verbal chunks left by Lincoln and persons around him.” He asserts that he has “sorted jumbled piles of fragments, restored them, and pieced them together in a way that reveals the speakers’ world.” He wants to do that “so meticulously” that “someone viewing them in the display case (this book) can comprehend the civilization by viewing the assembled vessel itself, without having to read explanatory captions (my personal opinions).” By selecting “which shards to assemble and which to discard,” says Miller, “I offer a very personal portrait of what Lincoln was all about. . . . I present a world, not a point of view and not a drama” (xi).

Despite that statement, and a book title that suggests something else, in reality, Miller spends most of his time on Lincoln and some on his world and does neither convincingly. There is no narrative here—no sense of character development, as in Honor’s Voice. Exactly why Miller has chosen this approach remains to the end baffling, for “the world” he creates is mostly through the memories of those around Lincoln. It does not include discussion of the development of Illinois’
demography, political culture, society, or economy. The larger world of American life in this period is also overlooked. And despite his statements about his not offering his opinions, the reader will find Miller has plenty of them in the text and the notes—beginning on page xii, when he tells the reader how and why he accepts some sources and rejects others.

The book is organized chronologically: the first chapter on the Kentucky years, the second on Indiana, the third on Lincoln’s first year in Illinois, and the remaining six on Lincoln between early 1832 and late 1834. It ends with his election to the Illinois House of Representatives in August 1834 and a last chapter entitled “Law Studies, Revenge, Romance.” As to allocation of space, the Kentucky years receive the shortest shrift—31 of the 321 pages of text. Indiana gets 59, all in one chapter. The remaining 231 pages are devoted to the early Illinois years, and most of those—195—deal with the period 1832 to 1834. Probably Miller has devoted more space to this time of Lincoln’s life than any other author. The book ends abruptly—with the Berry-Lincoln debt unresolved and no sense of the course of Lincoln’s life to that point. One looks in vain for a systematic effort to address the origins and nature of Lincoln’s views on religion and slavery, the reasons for Lincoln’s preferring the politics of Henry Clay (erroneously identified as Whig, a term that did not exist prior to 1834), his preference for reading and writing over physical labor, or his relationship with his father. And the author gives the reader no sense of what he plans next.

The amount of space allocated to a short span of Lincoln’s life, and the 100 pages of notes suggest thorough research and detailed writing. His use of Illinois newspapers of the early to mid-1830s for the 1834 campaign, for example, is extensive and commendable. Appearances, however, are deceiving. Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis’s Hern-don’s Informants is used extensively and is his chief source. Transcripts from that valuable resource are used not only liberally but uncritically. Dennis Hanks, whom the author admits is a not especially reliable source, is cited many times.

Examples of the dangers of Miller’s eccentric use of sources are plentiful. Despite scholars’ descriptions of Lincoln as a teetotaler, “[r]eliable testimony indicates that Lincoln was a light user of beverage alcohol” (51). Dennis Hanks, John Hanks, Nathaniel Grigsby, David Turnham, and William Wood are cited as sources. Dennis Hanks is also the source for several statements (37–38) about Lincoln’s fondness for hunting—an image that scholars summarily reject. In another case, Miller offers a lengthy quotation relating to alleged sexual rela-
tions with his teenaged stepsister that comes from the notes of William Herndon. “Such a story is so entertaining,” Miller declares, “that I’d like to believe it” (72). Regarding the story of Lincoln’s walking three miles to correct an error he made as a store clerk in making change and another four miles to deliver tea to someone who had been mistakenly shorted, he notes “[s]upposedly such occurrences really happened and were extraordinary enough to be talked about and remembered” (117).

One of the most egregious misuses of evidence involves Lincoln’s alleged response to a New Orleans slave market in 1831, the second of his two trips to the Crescent City via flatboat. According to John Hanks, Lincoln said “‘By God, boys, let’s get away from this. If I ever get a chance to hit that thing, I’ll hit it hard.’” Historians have long since discounted the statement, as Hanks did not travel to New Orleans with Lincoln. Miller insists there is “uncertainty” about that and goes on to declare that “[a] person doesn’t have to be present at an event in order to know it happened.” There is no reason “for skepticism, let alone rejection, of Hanks’s and Herndon’s testimonies that they heard Lincoln talk about the incident” (109).

In addition to heavy reliance on statements from Herndon’s Informants, Miller’s secondary sources, which he identifies as reliable authorities, tend to be old: among others, Herndon, John Nicolay and John Hay, Albert Beveridge, Ida Tarbell, William Barton, Louis Warren, and Emanuel Hertz. By contrast, recent works by Burlingame, Wilson, Winkle, and William Lee Miller are not used (though he cites Wilson several times and Winkle once without indicating in the text or the notes that he understands their arguments).

Regarding mechanics and style, one must begin by noting that the organization of this book is weak. The number of endnotes—on many pages, virtually every sentence—is excessive and distracting. The chapter on Indiana, for instance, has eight endnotes on average per page, and the chapter that follows about seven. The frequent use of lengthy and often seemingly irrelevant quotations is another indication that the author has not fully digested and assessed his material. Miller’s writing style is distinctive, with frequent indications in the first person of where he stands on issues. Combined with organizational weakness and a huge amount of detail, that makes for a tedious reading experience.

As to the value of Miller’s book—which from the title will apparently be the first of several volumes—one might be able to find material in the details that could be of use, especially about the 1834
legislative campaign. There is nothing distinctive here, though—no contribution to the literature about Lincoln that sets it apart and offers new material and new perspectives. This is definitely not a book to recommend to someone who knows little or nothing about Lincoln. For those who know more, it’s probably best to skip *Lincoln and His World* and go directly to *Herndon’s Informants*. 