Review

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The story of Abraham Lincoln’s presidency is an oft told narrative. It is a rare feat to produce new scholarship on Lincoln’s life as the nation’s sixteenth president. James A. Rawley’s book *A Lincoln Dialogue* does not necessarily tell us anything new, but the manner in which the subject matter is presented is certainly innovative and refreshing. *A Lincoln Dialogue* is a pseudodocumentary history of Lincoln’s life from 1860 to 1865, with the story told not with editorial text but with letters to and from Lincoln, newspaper reports, diaries, speeches, and government documents. Appearing large and dense, the book is neither; it is actually a very good and quick read—a new kind of documentary history—in which the document tells the story with brief narration and guidance by Rawley. As a result, Rawley does not intend to engage in historiographical trends or to make any judgments on Lincoln’s success or failure in prosecuting the war. In fact, his stated purpose is for us as readers to “draw our own conclusions from these important selections” (ix).

Rawley completed most of the work on this novel concept before his death in 2005. His sixty-year distinguished career as a Civil War and Lincoln scholar made him eminently qualified to produce a “compelling account of Abraham Lincoln and his presidency” in a “style favored by his mentor Allan Nevins, who believed that historians should write for wide readership by an engaged and informed general public” (ix). William Thomas, Rawley’s University of Nebraska colleague, shepherded the manuscript through publication nearly ten years after Rawley’s death, dealing with several technical issues and minor editorial changes. Thomas’s effort is to be commended, because this book probably would not have seen daylight if not for his determination.

*A Lincoln Dialogue* begins with a very short summary of Lincoln’s life from 1809 to 1860 using Lincoln’s campaign autobiographies as the source material. In thirty-six chapters, Rawley then covers Lincoln’s
nomination and election in 1860; ranges over his search for competent generals, decisions on emancipation and arming African Americans, interactions with cabinet members and other politicians, prosecution of war objectors, reelection, and reconstruction ideas; and concludes with Lincoln’s assassination in 1865. While the documents are the centerpiece of Rawley’s book, they cannot stand alone, nor can Rawley’s text.

It is the methodology that makes this book unique. It is not a traditional documentary edition, in which transcribed and annotated documents comprise the principal structure. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* and *The Papers of Abraham Lincoln: Legal Documents and Cases* are the standard Lincoln documentary editions. While Roy P. Basler chose to include only Lincoln documents in *Collected Works*, Daniel W. Stowell, in *The Papers of Abraham Lincoln*, included important pleading documents, other case file materials, and correspondence with the organization centered on the law case. Other documentary editions of written works by Lincoln’s secretaries and cabinet members help researchers understand better the world of Lincoln.

Rawley also does not follow the methodology of a documentary history, in which editorial headnotes, oftentimes interpretive, precede fully transcribed documents. *A Lincoln Dialogue* differs from Don E. Fehrenbacher’s more traditional documentary history, *Abraham Lincoln: A Documentary Portrait through His Speeches and Writings*, which presents more than one hundred of Lincoln’s letters and speeches seriatim. Fehrenbacher’s introduction sets up Lincoln letters only but with the purpose of discerning “the contours of Lincoln’s character and career” from his prose. A more recent example of a documentary history, William E. Gienapp’s *This Fiery Trial: The Speeches and Writings* of Abraham Lincoln.


of Abraham Lincoln, includes brief introductions that “place the documents in the context of Lincoln’s career.” Gienapp also edited the broader Civil War and Reconstruction documentary collection, which includes some Lincoln documents but focuses mainly on the assemblage of documents from 1830 to 1877—the antebellum period, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Gienapp even includes Confederate documents for a more balanced portrait of the Civil War. Lastly, Gary Phillip Zola’s We Called Him Rabbi Abraham: Lincoln and American Jewry provides significantly more content in headnotes before presenting full documents not only by Lincoln but also to or about Lincoln.

Rawley, on the other hand, does not transcribe full letters with datelines and signature lines. This methodology works well, as Rawley’s voice blends into and out of documents without visual interrupters of “My Dear Sir,” “Executive Mansion, December 15, 1861,” or “Yours very truly.” He only includes the general text of a document—many times transcribing not the entire document but only the part that concerns the chapter’s subject matter. It is as if the reader is a fly on the wall listening to conversations. Narrative text and documentary text combine to produce an engaging story. Rawley, like Zola and Gienapp (in Civil War and Reconstruction), features many other people in addition to Lincoln, furthering Fehrenbacher’s idea that much of what is known about Lincoln comes from sources other than Lincoln himself.

While Dialogue is ostensibly about Lincoln the president, it is more about the Civil War with Lincoln as the central character. Rawley chooses to examine congressional sessions, troop movements and battles, and political machinations that relate to the broader conflict. Lincoln’s non–Civil War activities as president, such as the Morrill Act and the transcontinental railroad, are largely ignored. This book is meant for readers interested in Lincoln’s leadership abilities in prosecuting the war. It is difficult if not impossible, of course, to tell the story of President Lincoln without including the context and environment of the Civil War around him.

In this heavily political examination, however, the personal Lincoln is absent. Mary Lincoln has less than a half dozen mentions in the entire book. Willie Lincoln has only one mention: as a passenger on the inaugural train from Springfield to Washington (37). There is no

discussion of Willie’s illness and death, which had a significant effect on his father. Additionally, the early Civil War deaths of Elmer E. Ellsworth and Edward D. Baker also had an emotional impact on Lincoln. Baker’s death is only mentioned in passing in a discussion of Baker’s congressional defense of Lincoln against John C. Breckinridge (122), but Ellsworth’s death is overlooked entirely, despite being the subject of one of Lincoln’s best and most well-known letters of condolence.

Another overlooked personal aspect of Lincoln is his legal career. Many recent works have demonstrated the importance of Lincoln’s twenty-five years as a lawyer on his presidency. But the brief review of Lincoln’s life at the beginning of the book fails to mention that Lincoln was a lawyer at all. Other than a fleeting reference to the McCormick Reaper case, featuring Lincoln’s future secretary of war Edwin M. Stanton, Rawley only mentions “Lincoln the lawyer” in penning “an ingenious answer to his question about constitutionality” of West Virginia’s admission to the Union (307). One may argue that a book on Lincoln’s presidency should not contain many references to his legal career, but Phillip Shaw Paludan’s The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln frequently notes legal antecedents in Lincoln’s life that help to shape important presidential decisions.

Another editorial decision that deserves minor criticism would be the use of endnotes rather than footnotes. Since the document is the central theme, readers might want easier access to contextual or citation information on the page rather than having to thumb back several hundred pages. Endnotes are certainly appropriate in traditional narrative monographs, but footnotes are almost a necessity in a book so focused on documents.

These problems, however, do not detract from the overall quality of the book. Again, this is an innovative way to uniquely tell an old story, and it works well. Short chapters help to move the book along quickly, despite nearly six hundred pages of text. Rawley excels at setting up chapters and stories in a concise manner by choosing certain documents and certain passages within those documents. His selection is worth noting, as it is a form of interpretation, despite being an ever-so-subtle form. One excellent example is the chapter on the 1864 election season. Rawley includes at least six speeches or letters that

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Lincoln gave or wrote. Lincoln relates certain ideas and addresses each of the groups individually, but in toto, Lincoln is arguing for his reelection and why it is important on a grander scale (471–83). By publishing in succession these speeches, which occurred over a period of several months, Rawley subtly implies that Lincoln was campaigning—without actually campaigning since “custom prescribed that presidential candidates participate little in the campaign” (473).

A closer examination of two chapters illustrates the depth and breadth of Rawley’s selections. In a typical chapter, “Grant and the War in the West,” Rawley quotes at length eighteen documents, including ten from Abraham Lincoln. Three each are from General Don Carlos Buell and General Henry Halleck. One document is by Alexander McClure, summarizing a conversation he had with Lincoln, and one document is by Senator James Harlan, who quoted a letter from a constituent criticizing General Ulysses S. Grant after the Battle of Shiloh (213–25). A longer chapter, “Lincoln vs. Seymour,” summarizes the larger discussion about the prosecution of the war between the president and the Democratic governor of New York, Horatio Seymour. This chapter includes twenty-four documents with more than half by Lincoln and Seymour. Other letters or documents, by McClure, Fernando Wood, John Hay, William Cullen Bryant, and others, add to the subject matter of the draft, Clement Vallandigham’s arrest, and the Emancipation Proclamation (389–409). Both of these chapters demonstrate Lincoln’s intense involvement in overseeing all aspects of the war, diplomacy, and politics.

A Lincoln Dialogue fits the traditional political biography that Lincoln was firmly in command of the war effort, espoused by T. Harry Williams and James McPherson. Readers are reminded that Lincoln, while believing that events controlled him, seems to have had the best handle on how to manage the war. While Lincoln may have moved slowly on certain matters, particularly with emancipation, his decisions were generally correct and timely. Lincoln’s political, military, and diplomatic skills are on full display, while social, personal, and economic aspects of Lincoln’s life take a back seat. Rawley highlights Lincoln’s evolutionary tack toward emancipation, leadership skills over his cabinet and fractured party, questions concerning the expansion of presidential war powers, and overall maturation during his four years in office.