Review Essay

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“It isn’t what we don’t know that troubles us; it’s what we know that just ain’t so.” That aphorism, attributed to Will Rogers, sums up historians’ reactions to remarks about the past that “just ain’t so.” Sometimes those remarks come from students, sometimes from persons who are simply passing along what they heard or read “somewhere” or maybe even what they learned in school. In some instances, though, we hear or read arguments by historians eager to perpetuate a “fact” or an idea they claim to be true, often with the suspicion that others are conspiring to prevent their “truth” from being revealed.

Countless statements about Abraham Lincoln’s sayings and doings persist as legends and myths. Some have their origins in conversations among those who knew Lincoln or knew someone who knew him, and they appear yet today in books, articles, and conversations about him. Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher, Rodney Davis, and Douglas Wilson,1 among others, have sought to separate fact from fiction in the words of Lincoln’s contemporaries. As the title of his collection of essays indicates, Edward Steers seeks to discredit some of the most familiar legends, myths, hoaxes, and fables surrounding Lincoln yet today.

In some instances the legends and myths that Steers targets have already disappeared, and it is something of a surprise that he begins with one such—the Lincoln birthplace cabin, now in the care of the National Park Service. Visit that cabin at Hodgenville, Kentucky, and you will find no one who regards it as authentic. A facsimile, if it can be called that, exists in the supposed location of the original, but it stands in a miniature Greek temple designed by John Russell Pope. Merrill

Peterson described Pope’s design too charitably as “pure and serene and utterly unrelated to the historical Lincoln.” When we visited, our guide had two “talking points”: the temple has sixteen columns because Lincoln was our sixteenth president; the fifty-six steps leading to it represent the years in Lincoln’s life. What more could she say? Steers describes how the perpetrators of the hoax claiming the building housed in the temple to be authentic had to settle for the possibility that some of the logs in its sides might have come from the authentic birthplace. Yet, as Dwight Pitcaithly, the former chief historian of the National Park Service, has stated, the cabin “is symbolic of a need for an accessible past and a willingness to embrace myths that are too popular, too powerful, to be diminished by the truth” (13).

One of the myths Steers selects for scrutiny concerns Lincoln’s paternity. Promoters of this myth claim that Lincoln was born in North Carolina, the illegitimate son of Nancy Hanks and Abraham Enloe. Steers draws on the research of others, who have concluded that the illegitimacy claims are based entirely on hearsay. Lincoln’s birth in Kentucky as the son of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks was confirmed by his cousin, Dennis Hanks, in response to a question posed by William Herndon. He was there, Hanks said, the day of Lincoln’s birth. The myth of Lincoln’s illegitimacy, Steers says, thrives among those who see illegitimacy as a stain on the character of both the mother and the baby (28).

Next, in two chapters, Steers takes on the story of Lincoln’s alleged romance with Ann Rutledge and the purported effect of her death on Lincoln. The story had its roots in William Herndon’s speculations about Abraham and Ann, and it took on new life in the 1920s, when Wilma Frances Minor created an account based on fabricated documents. Although Worthington Chauncy Ford, a former head of the Manuscript Division in the Library of Congress, denounced the documents as forgeries, Lincoln biographers William Barton and Ida Tarbell hesitantly accepted them. Carl Sandburg pronounced the documents “entirely authentic” (38), and tests of the paper and ink by a forensic chemist supported their authenticity, as did several handwriting experts. The publication of Minor’s three-part article in the Atlantic Monthly, however, induced Lincoln scholars, including Paul Angle, to challenge it, and they did so convincingly.

Steers’s accounts of the episode and its aftermath, and of the relocation of fragments of Ann Rutledge’s remains in 1890, are among the most impressive parts in the book. But Steers knows better than to at-

tempt a definitive account of the Lincoln-Rutledge relationship, for the evidence for such an account does not exist. He apparently does not want to be included in the ranks of historians who have changed their positions on it. David Donald, he asserts incorrectly, “has changed his position three times, from disbelieving the story to believing to disbelieving to believing”3 (51). The last of those changes did not occur.

Mary Todd Lincoln’s remark that her husband was not a “technical Christian” did not deter those who wished to “Christianize” him while he was alive and even posthumously. Some claimed that he had been secretly baptized, but Steers writes that, whatever Lincoln’s religious beliefs were or were not, “there is no evidence to support his conversion and subsequent baptism” (79). The wishing, however, will no doubt go on.

Some of the myths surrounding Lincoln are “orphans,” that is, they cannot be traced to their origins. In the 1970s, Senator Lowell Weicker of Connecticut resurrected one such myth—that Lincoln appeared before a Senate committee to rebut charges that Mary Lincoln was a Confederate spy. Weicker wanted to cite it as a precedent to induce President Richard Nixon to testify about the Watergate break-in. Steers confirms that “Lincoln never appeared before the committee” (88). Nor did Richard Nixon.

Lincoln’s way with words—his “sword,” as Douglas Wilson describes it—makes him one of the most quotable figures in American history.4 However, determining whether Lincoln said or wrote specific things attributed to him is not always easy. Steers chooses to demonstrate how difficult it is by citing Lincoln’s eloquent letter to Mrs. Lydia Bixby, the widowed mother of sons killed in the Civil War. Lincoln believed they numbered five, but in fact only two had been war casualties. Because John Hay wrote many letters signed by Lincoln, some scholars, including Michael Burlingame, contend that the Bixby letter was one of them.5 Steers counters that contention by citing a statement by Robert Lincoln that Hay himself had told him he did not write the letter (101).

3. In “We Are Lincoln Men”: Abraham Lincoln and His Friends (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), Donald explains why he changed from disbelieving the stories to believing them, and then to disbelieving them again. He then explains the reasons for his “present negative opinion” on page 23.
Another myth rebutted by Steers concerns the “lost” draft of the Gettysburg address. Examination of that draft by experts and “the data resulting from the many tests conducted on it, he says, show that “it is a fake, albeit an extremely clever one. . . .” (124).

Concerning assertions that Lincoln was a homosexual, propounded most prominently in C. A. Tripp’s *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln*, Steers cites the stretches and flaws in the author’s thesis. Many others have done so as well, and the Lincoln-was-gay myth has been largely discredited. Tripp’s problem, he says, was that rather than following the truth wherever it may have led him, “he followed it where he wanted it to go. Tripp was simply an advocate. An admitted homosexual, Tripp attempted to pin his tail on Abraham Lincoln’s donkey to add legitimacy to being gay.” In so doing, he continues, Tripp “laid the groundwork for a myth that may outlive us all” (149).

Steers devotes a chapter to the relentless efforts of Dr. Samuel Alexander Mudd’s wife, daughter, and grandson to have his conviction by a military tribunal overturned. He had been tried for having aided John Wilkes Booth in his plot to kill Lincoln in his flight from Ford’s Theatre after the assassination. Although President Andrew Johnson had pardoned Mudd in 1869, Mudd’s kinfolk wanted him declared innocent, a cause pursued until the death of Mudd’s grandson, Dr. Richard Mudd, in 2002 at age 101. Yet, says Steers, Dr. Mudd remains a folk hero, “the underdog who fought against a ruthless government intent on destroying him. . . . Of all the myths surrounding the tragic assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Dr. Mudd’s portrayal as an innocent victim heads the list” (176). This is so despite Edward Steers’s relentless efforts to demolish it. For more details on those efforts, see Steers’s *His Name Is Still Mudd.*

Was Lincoln’s assassination the result of a conspiracy engineered by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton? Was John Wilkes Booth really the assassin? Speculation on those questions began with the finding of Booth’s diary in his pocket after he was killed while attempting to escape. Several pages from the diary were missing; witnesses differed as to whether they were removed before or after the diary was given to Stanton. That opened the way for a chemist-turned-amateur historian, Otto Eisenschiml, to use “clever innuendo and manipulation of facts,” to frame questions that “pointed an incriminating finger” at Stanton as

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the conspiracy’s mastermind. Sorting through the elements of real or imagined conspiracies is always challenging, and Steers’s efforts to lay this one open to understanding are not entirely successful. Nonetheless, he shows convincingly that fabrications played a part in the attempts to prove a conspiracy and that they were intended to “rewrite the true history of the Lincoln assassination.” Even so, “the myth of the missing pages and Stanton’s complicity in Lincoln’s death will continue to live on, finding new believers in future generations” (202).

The concluding chapters deal with obscure persons and incidents in the assassination of Lincoln. The first, identified through extensive sleuthing, were “Peanut” John Burroughs, Nathan Simms, and “Coughdrop” Joey Ratto, all of whom allegedly held Booth’s getaway horse outside Ford’s Theatre the night of the assassination. The second was Andrew Giles Potter, said to be one of the traitors who ordered Lincoln’s death. Unable to find any trace of him in historical records, Steers calls him “the man who never was,” created by a “clever hoax”8 (230).

So there! Edward Steers has put a scholarly kibosh on fourteen legends, myths, hoaxes, and confabulations. The debates are over. Conspiracies about the Lincoln assassination are exposed as unfounded.

Not quite. Debates do not end with scholarly arguments, and conspiracy theories seem never to die. Take for example theories about conspirators in another assassination, that of John F. Kennedy in 1963. Vincent Bugliosi, a former prosecutor, spent eight years examining every conspiracy theory he could find. The result was a 1,612-page book, accompanied by another 1,125 pages of notes on a CD-ROM. Bugliosi’s purposes, he said, were to educate Americans that Oswald killed Kennedy, acting alone, and to expose “the conspiracy theorists and the abject worthlessness of all their allegations.” His concluding line: “I believe this book has achieved both of these goals.”9 Nonetheless, he also believes that “conspiracy think” will continue to thrive. And so it has, as is evident in the appearance of The Road to Dallas: The Assassina-

8. There is confusion over the Potter and Burroughs names. In the caption under a picture, Potter is identified as Andrew Giles Porter, and in Steers’s account of the assassination “Peanut John” is Joseph Burroughs, known as John Peanuts. Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 114, 118. Nathan Simms is not mentioned in this book, and he, Burroughs, and Porter do not appear in William Hanchett’s The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

tion of John F. Kennedy, by David Kaiser. Perhaps conspiracy skeptics can never overcome conspiracy think.

Even so, Edward Steers, by producing a well-written and thoroughly researched and documented book, provides a welcome service to readers who believe that historical accounts must be based on evidence and that fictitious ones should be treated as such. *Lincoln Legends* is a welcome addition to collections of Lincoln books.