Review Essay

Lincoln’s Last Days
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Both of these volumes are part of the Concise Lincoln Library, published by Southern Illinois University Press, and as such they offer engaging, well-written narratives of particular interest to audiences unfamiliar with Lincoln. But even experts in Lincoln studies will find these studies enjoyable to read and useful in the classroom. High school and college instructors looking for short monographs for their students will consider them among their many options.

John C. Waugh traces the final five months of the Civil War, between Lincoln’s reelection in November 1864 and Lee’s surrender in April 1865. With a narrative style that is at times moving and dramatic, Waugh expertly weaves together events on the battlefield and in Washington to demonstrate the important connections between military and political history. Waugh’s characterizations can be vivid and sometimes comical, as when he describes Alexander Hamilton Stephens as “a man with a giant’s mind in a shrimp’s body.” The image of the Confederate vice president arriving at Hampton Roads and peeling off a heavy overcoat that overpowered his diminutive frame is humorous but also metaphorical. The weary Stephens, swallowed by his coat, stands in stark contrast to the powerful, looming figure of Lincoln, who remarked at the sight that it was “‘the biggest shuck and the littlest ear’ that he ever did see.” Waugh’s choice of such evocative quotes brings his narrative to life and provides a lasting visual impact of a worn-down rebellion preparing to shed its burdens.

Likewise, in retracing the tragic events surrounding Lincoln’s murder and the trial of his assassins, Edward Steers clearly lays out how plans to assassinate the president along with the vice president
and the secretary of war grew from an inchoate plot among Confederate sympathizers to kidnap the chief executive at an event at the National Hotel. But Lincoln, in a prime example of historical contingency, decided at the last minute not to attend a ceremony for Indiana volunteers, thereby thwarting the kidnappers. When Lee surrendered a few days later, John Wilkes Booth concluded that something more profound must be done if the Confederacy were to be saved. One has to wonder what might have been, and Steers allows the reader to ponder without dwelling on the notion. The fast-paced narrative carries readers through that fateful night at Ford’s Theatre and Booth’s capture two weeks later, concluding with a brief recap of the conspirators’ trial that summer.

Both of these works provide excellent reviews of the standard scholarship on the end of the war and Lincoln’s assassination. Readers looking for new insights into either topic, however, will be disappointed. They should consult new scholarship to better understand how the field of Civil War studies has changed in the past two decades. For instance, the temporal boundaries typically associated with the war, particularly its ending, have shifted. In *After Appomattox*, Gregory P. Downs argues that the war did not end in April 1865, and he traces how wartime policies continued well after the conventional marker of Lee’s surrender. Not only did Confederate troops in Texas continue to fight through June of that year, but also the question of whether peace had been reestablished drove much of Reconstruction politics through the 1870s. It is because the government argued that the nation was still at war that the Lincoln assassins were tried in a military tribunal instead of a civilian court.

A must-read companion to the book by Steers is Martha Hodes’s Lincoln Prize–winning *Mourning Lincoln*, which moves beyond the crime itself to focus on the aftermath of the president’s murder. Tracing the many conflicting reactions Americans had to the assassination, Hodes reveals not only how the nation grieved for and, in some cases, celebrated the death of its fallen leader but also how those reactions revealed competing visions for the postwar period.

Both of the additions to the Concise Lincoln Library provide targeted explorations of Lincoln and the war’s end. Serious students of these topics, however, will wish to consult new works by scholars such as Downs and Hodes, who provide fresh analysis and new interpretations.