Review Essay

Publishing by Littles

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Lincoln’s own characterization of his education “by littles,” as penned in 1860 for John L. Scripps, proves to be surprisingly descriptive for us in the modern world as well. We are rich in books and other writing about Lincoln, yet people feel increasingly marooned in an information-heavy sea. We ought not to worry: since typesetting began to allow wider distribution of printed matter—drawing us steadily away from religiously orthodox books and into promiscuous pamphlets, newspapers, novels, book reviews, romances, and now blogs—the center has ceased to hold. Information about Lincoln is everywhere; some of it is meaningful.

Because newspapers are not always thinner gruel than books, here is one new publication that people who clip pithy op-eds from the newspaper will appreciate. And for those who dwell on the deepest of topics—human faith—here also is something between hard covers. These are two books intended to meet different needs. That one of them succeeds in its modest goals, while the other fails sadly in its overreach, affords a chance to comment on Lincoln publications generally and on these in particular.

First, the bad news. Ferenc Szasz, long a professor of western and religious history at the University of New Mexico, died before completing even a full draft of his manuscript about Lincoln and religion. Yet his widow and his department chair—along with the series editors of the Concise Lincoln Library—saw fit to publish it and charge full retail anyway. No Lincolnist seems to have read through it first. It is the shortest, at not quite seventy pages of main text, and the poorest in an otherwise mostly useful series now up to twenty volumes.
Professor Szasz’s book does have a few valuable features. The coverage ranges from the president’s ancestors to Lincoln as the center of American civil religion. Then the book asks, “Was Lincoln a Christian?” and rightly responds that “Lincoln absorbed the ethical dimension of Christianity” (67). It quotes Mary Todd Lincoln as admitting that he was not “technically” a Christian, that is, one who had gone through a conversion experience (68). And it concludes that during his presidency, “Lincoln had moved into a world beholden to Providence,” even letting that force determine when he might issue the Emancipation Proclamation (70, 69). But have we been misled by the framing question? Szasz concludes the book by failing to answer his own interrogative about Lincoln as a Christian: “The enigma remains” (70).

On the point about Providence and emancipation, Szasz makes an interesting claim: Though slavery was “undeniably” an ethical and moral issue to Lincoln, he nonetheless indicated, by the timing of his supposed admission of Providential force, “the precise moment when he showed his faith in the inherent moral righteousness of a covenanted universe” (69).

Is this to say that September 22, 1862, was a “precise moment” of Christian development? Szasz does not develop the point. By insinuation that moment did not come when Eddy Lincoln died in 1850; or Willie, in February 1862; or when the sixteenth president swore on a sizable Bible in the hand of Justice Roger B. Taney that he would uphold the Constitution, or did so again in 1864 before the gloweringly Christian chief justice Salmon P. Chase; or when he wrote out his private (undated, though presumed to be 1862) “Meditation on the Divine Will”; or when he went startlingly public in his Second Inaugural Address of 1865 by proclaiming, “The Almighty has His own purposes”; or when . . .? Szasz leaves us with a tantalizing, if inchoate, hypothesis.

One other point could launch a needful debate: “it is extremely doubtful if Lincoln heard an educated cleric deliver a well-argued sermon until he moved to Springfield in 1837” (13). This reviewer, though finding the assertion admissible, has doubts. Do we really know that Lincoln’s shadow darkened no church in New Orleans in 1828 or 1831? What exactly should “educated” mean in that context—in Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, or New Orleans? That only dimwits, blindly quoting long passages of scripture from memory (or by other “uneducated” methods), filled the itinerants’ pulpits of all western counties? How many little-educated people described those early clerics to (agnostic)
Herndon a lifetime later, and would they not know “reason” as well as a modern academic knows “educated”?

Szasz gets lost along many paths in this study. Can we really say that “Lincoln’s famous ‘lost speech’ at Bloomington, Illinois, supposedly included six more biblical quotations” when the “recovered memory” of that speech forty years later is not accepted by most Lincolnists? Minting the other side of that wooden nickel is Carl Sandburg, relating how Lincoln bested Reverend Peter Cartwright’s heaven-versus-hell dichotomy with the irreligious quip, “I’m going to Congress” (23). If so short a book on so deep and wide a topic as religious belief draws from such stagnant wells, are we in danger of being left to believe that Lincoln himself was a Bible-quoting hypocrite?

More favorably it can be said that a theme the author seems to have intended to make central to his unfinished study is a geographic and cultural one. He broadly identifies Springfield and environs as “the Ohio River Valley” for purposes of analyzing religious thought and practice. Yet such a view is harder to defend for slighting the mid-Atlantic, New York, and New England migrants—such as David Davis, Dr. John Allen, or (London-born) Edward D. Baker—who also influenced the young rail-splitter and attorney/politician. Beyond individuals, much good historical writing characterizes how the Sangamon Valley and central Illinois, not to mention the upper Mississippi, including by extension the Chicago/Lake Michigan region at times, are sections distinct from the Ohio River Valley. Still, we are the poorer for not getting to read more of the author’s ideas about how he connects Lincoln’s religious thinking so firmly to a region he and his family left in 1830. That seedbed might well have been briefly and narrowly determinative, but the “growth” in Lincoln’s outlook (Eric Foner, Allen Guelzo, Douglas L. Wilson, and others each dwell on this development in a multitude of forms) could have been profitably taken up at length. If indeed more than 30 percent of central Illinoisans hailed from points across the North, should we not allow for their influence on southern neighbors? Why would influence, in Szasz’s telling, shift only in a south-to-north direction?

Szasz does walk through the hall of faiths, if quickly: sections or paragraphs on Shakers and Quakers, on Latter-Day Saints, on Native Americans, and on the spiritualists (misspelling Nettie Colburn Maynard’s name). He relies well on A. E. Elmore’s recent vigorous if eccentric work on the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer as influences on the young and old Lincoln. And yet, is it modern and inclusive, or largely irrelevant, to cite Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise’s statement that Lincoln received a majority of the non-Christian vote, at a time when Jews made up about half a percent of the population (29)? Ought one refer to another Jew, Julius Hammerslough, as an
“old family friend of Lincoln’s” if he first set up shop in Springfield in 1857 (34)?

Szasz, in eight short paragraphs on Lincoln and civil religion within a larger chapter of similar name, mentions Barack Obama, 1960s sociologist Robert Bellah, the 1947 “Freedom Train,” the Spanish Civil War, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. These references might have been notes moving him toward the major thinkers but are not very descriptive. Conversely, the Puritan strain in American religion overall, and by extension in Lincoln’s roots if not precisely in his specific mind, is long attested. One recent writer quickly traces Lincoln’s thought amidst our civil religion to Alexis de Tocqueville, Benjamin Franklin, and Blaise Pascal in just four paragraphs on the same topic.\(^2\)

The handling and coverage of the larger issues are difficult to take with confidence when so many of the small issues are handled poorly, for the far stronger sensation in reading this book is of bumping over its potholes. Among the litany of errors: Lincoln’s ancestor-immigrants came from Norfolk “Country” on one page and “County” on the next, though neither term is correct (40, 41); settled in “Higham” but it was Hingham, Massachusetts (40); and are called “Congregationalists” but they were Puritans by their own and by later analysts’ lights (6). Obama’s religious denomination is also called Congregationalist, though he and his family were members of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago—why would Obama be named multiple times in this book (3)? The author misdates the year of Thomas Lincoln’s move to Indiana and thus gets Abe’s age then wrong (10); writes that Elijah Lovejoy was “assassinated” (8); offers that Lincoln “may have served the church as sexton for teaching while he was courting Mary Todd in Springfield in the 1840s,” a claim that will startle many people like James Mahoney (that’s Matheny) (4, 68); avers that “there was little overt religiosity in his makeup until he departed for Washington” (28), despite Szasz’s own able efforts to show how often Lincoln quoted from or alluded to scriptural writings long before that date, including the Book of Common Prayer (which has always been much longer than the 364 pages he ascribes to it); holds that the Republican wigwam of 1860 was held in Chicago “by chance” (26); alludes to Treasury official L. E. Christensen (so too the index) though it was Chittenden (45); writes in a section “Lincoln and Coins” (in this book?) that a Native American first appeared on the penny in 1864 (63), but it was 1859 (and much of Szasz’s earlier scholarship had been about

\(^2\) Steven B. Smith, “How to Read Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address,” in Smith, ed., The Writings of Abraham Lincoln (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 476–77, which Szasz probably was not able to read before his death.
Native Americans). What he quotes as the president’s “bath of public opinion,” poured by so many office-visitors, is what every other writer has called Lincoln’s “public opinion baths” (30).

Some errors are grossly misleading. He thinks that the Emancipation Proclamation’s ringing invocation of “the considerate judgment of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God” came from Lincoln’s pen, but it was Chase’s (46). Lincoln did not “issue an amnesty proclamation offering pardons” in December 1863 (69); he signed the Congressional act that did. A famous written phrase of 1864, “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong,” is misquoted (69).

After Lincoln’s death, errors live on. Szasz dates the origin of “the public controversy” over Lincoln’s religion to 1873, but it was much debated from 1866 to 1872 (3). The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company of Ft. Wayne is misnamed (58). Historian and minister William E. Barton is called Bruce Barton (an ad man) over and over. Is it niggling to kvetch about such points from a dying scholar? Yet this same Barton/Barton mistake occurs in his 2008 book Abraham Lincoln and Robert Burns (from the same press). Many items in this sad list had to be chronologized for you, the reader, because in the book they pop up in no real order. Grammatical stumbles like “Over fifty years in the planning, Congress finally appointed” are, thankfully, rare (61).

His friend Richard Etulain bulks up the book with ten useful pages on the historiography of Lincoln and religion. Sara Gabbard offers six dense pages of direct Lincoln quotations on the topic (the Bixby letter contains a wrong word here). Are these salvation enough before a bibliography of 107 entries in which two authors’ names are misspelled, two titles are misrendered, and nine publication years are wrong or missing? No one more than glancingly familiar with the lineaments of the Lincoln field seems to have looked at the manuscript for this book before it was sent to the printer. One of the series editors gets sour desserts by having her name misspelled in the acknowledgments.

Seekers after a good long book about Lincoln and religion can turn to Allen Guelzo, Ronald White, Stewart Winger, or Wayne Temple. Intelligent treatments by the more overtly Christian include Joe L. Wheeler, Stephen Mansfield, and Philip Ostergard. The desired “short book on his religion,” a trickier effort, has been attempted with some success by William J. Wolf, Michael Burkhimer, and, perhaps best, Elton Trueblood. But the Lincoln student, not to mention the director of a library budget, is not well served by the book under review.

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Lewis E. Lehrman advises us, as Lincoln did a young aspirant, that “work, work, work is the main thing.” His lessons in the fifty-two essays compiled here, most of them newspaper columns he wrote over the past twenty years, are usually also that direct. Among the headlines are “Franklin and Lincoln: True Leaders for Change”; “The Patriotism of Abraham Lincoln”; “Abraham Lincoln’s Faith and Fatalism”; “Future President Pressed Antislavery Theme in 1860 Visit [to Connecticut]”; “Lincoln and War Leadership”; “Lincoln: First Technology President”; and “Churchill and Lincoln: Never Give Up.”

By no means are these essays simplistic. Liberal use of direct quotation upholds each point. If a reader feels that five quotations from Lincoln’s remarks to the 166th Ohio Volunteer Regiment on how each one of us in a free republic may aspire to the highest office is too many, or that the same number of quotations from parts of the Declaration of Independence is somehow redundant, then one has merely espied a general phenomenon of the bulky field of Lincoln writing: that some themes are so central to the self-made man’s life, and some ideas are so plain for tracing why he made equality before the law his cynosure, that they bear repeating. Lehrman does not stop at the obvious, though. Twice he takes on the question of labor versus capital as laid out in Lincoln’s first annual address to Congress, finding the basis for why each cohort of our economy, indeed, throughout the world, has seized on Lincoln’s views in promoting their cause. Twice he takes on the “true system” of how a poor man may rise, by combination of labor, wit, saving, ambition, and advance.

This reviewer found some novel ideas in the short essays or, if not exactly novel, then rather less often encountered in the Lincoln field than one might expect. “Above all, in the best American leader and teacher, there is a deep and well-developed code of honor. . . . The intellect and the will must be focused, not dissipated” (55–56). This Mr. Lehrman urged on the students of a small Harrisburg school while discussing the Declaration of Independence. While other scholars have taken the “code of honor” problem as a springboard to explain how the Civil War broke out and continued, both lines of attack seem fair. There are six insightful pages on Lincoln’s relations with New York and its denizens. Lehrman also gets off the East Coast, traveling a bit in these feuilletons: Lincoln and Oregon, Lincoln and Kansas, of course Lincoln and the state that “brought out his best”—oops, he refers to Pennsylvania, not Illinois. It’s a point worth chewing over. We all ought to view Lincoln as a bit more continental when reminded that his friend E. D. Baker is buried in San Francisco (209). Perhaps that was a reason he told Mary in his last day that he would like to visit California someday.
Sad to say, this volume had a pretty good proofreader to start, but he or she flagged. There are five typos in its first half and fourteen in the latter half. On page 166, Lincoln’s patent-model number is wrong; on page 175, the Battle of the Wilderness is slotted in the wrong year; on page 198, a photograph from May 1860 by Marsh is dated as a June photo by Hesler. Laughably, a full-page illustration of Booth shooting Lincoln bears the oversized caption that this event occurred on September 29, 1858 (210). Is it any wonder that some kids don’t know when the Civil War began? More seriously, this reviewer has long noticed that the well-funded Gilder Lehrman Institute, from which the all of the many fine illustrations in this book come, provides erroneous dates and names on a painful number of its holdings. These two gentlemen are widely admired for funding such an archive and enterprise. May the same quality control they know in their business lives reach the operations at their philanthropies.

Books may be measured, if not judged, by their ambition. Lehrman’s assemblage here was presumably a labor of love, and he paid for its publication. Among previous essayists in this vein, Benjamin Thomas had his squibs and speeches compiled a few years back by Michael Burlingame. In earlier days, Paul Angle and Roy Basler got similar honorific treatment by themselves or friends. Lehrman joins a dignified, gentlemanly company. I hope he finds a scrupulous editor for himself and all of us in the future.

Aside from learning about Lincoln, one overall sense in passing through the pages of these two books is that despite their occasional usefulness and intelligence, they were sloppily finished. In one case the writer had the financial resources to produce a better product. In the other, the institutional resources ought to have done the job. Neither volume was exactly “self-published,” and yet anyone reading widely these days will detect more and more “publishing” that is largely a one-person effort, little better than a blog. A half-dozen New York houses and another handful of university presses retain very high standards (one recent book about Nicolay and Hay, from Viking, bears not a single typo). Most of the rest seem to suffer a deficit of skills or mission, abandoning publishing for mere printing. In the United Kingdom in the 1960s a similar and sudden collapse in standards of book preparation occurred, for what western civilization has for five hundred years rightly prized and advanced upon. In America, a land of doers and do-it-yourselfers, individual responsibility can step up when external standards fade. Writer, heal thyself; your friends and publishers might not.