Roundtable:
The Better Angels

Whenever there is a new film about Abraham Lincoln, it is a major event for Lincoln scholars as well as the general public. Thus, when the publicity department for The Better Angels contacted me last fall and offered to send some pre-release copies I jumped at the chance. I decided to send them to four scholars of different backgrounds to see how each of them interpreted the film, and I could not be more pleased with the results. William E. Bartelt contributes his experience as the leading scholar on Lincoln’s Indiana years as well as his direct involvement with the film, Jackie Hogan offers the perspective of a sociologist interested in Lincoln’s legacy and the way he is represented in popular culture, Megan Kate Nelson brings her usual wit and familiarity with cultural history to bear, and John Stauffer uses his vast knowledge of American art and culture to offer a deep analysis of the film’s artistic and religious resonances. I hope you enjoy this new feature, and perhaps we can try it again for future Lincoln films.

Christian McWhirter, Editor

The Making of The Better Angels
WILLIAM E. BARTELT

Early in 2009 I received a call from the Indiana Film Commission seeking permission to give my contact information to film producers A. J. Edwards and Nick Gonda. The pair had read my recent book on Lincoln’s youth and wanted to discuss their idea for a film covering a brief period of Abraham Lincoln’s life in Indiana. My subsequent conversations with the pair revealed that although Lincoln lived more than thirteen years in Indiana, their film would represent about four years of his life—ages eight to eleven or twelve—and would explore relationships between Lincoln and both his birth mother and his stepmother. Ultimately, the result is the film The Better Angels, a title
borrowed from the final words of Lincoln’s first inaugural address, “the better angels of our nature.”1

Clearly, this effort aspired to be neither a Ken Burns documentary nor a big-budget Hollywood production like Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln*. Yet, because Edwards and Gonda were associates of visionary film director, screenwriter, and producer Terrence Malick, this film, to be written and directed by Edwards, would appear in the Malick style. Obviously they sought to produce a work faithful to history, but as the film’s disclaimer states, “certain details, dialogue, scenes, and characters have been invented or adapted in the process of dramatization of the film.” In April 2009 Edwards and Gonda traveled to southern Indiana to visit the sites where Lincoln spent much of his boyhood. The three of us spent two days at Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial, Lincoln State Park, and other locations in and around Spencer County known by young Lincoln. Both men wanted to especially learn more about Lincoln’s neighbors and their interaction with the Lincoln family. I think they left Indiana convinced this story was worth telling. Our correspondence continued for the next three years, as Edwards researched Lincoln’s Indiana youth. He read my book *There I Grew Up: Remembering Lincoln’s Indiana Youth* as well as the works of Albert Beveridge and Louis Warren.2 In addition to asking general questions, Edwards inquired about specific issues such as lighting devices the Lincolns would have used and the appearance of the pulpit Thomas Lincoln built for the Little Pigeon Primitive Baptist Church. Edwards also asked for a detailed itinerary of sites to visit in Illinois so he could better understand the lives of Lincoln and his family there. In his reading, Edwards became especially taken by the Eleanor Atkinson interview with Dennis Hanks, published in 1908 as a small book titled *The Boyhood of Lincoln*. This text provided both the narrative to bind the story into a film with very little dialogue and the sorrowful conclusion to the film, with Hanks visiting Sarah Lincoln to tell her of her stepson’s assassination.


Much of my correspondence with Edwards dealt with where the film would be shot. I pushed strongly for an Indiana location, with its appropriate feel in terrain and climate. Although the filmmakers agreed and spent three days scouting possible Hoosier sites, in the end economic considerations trumped appropriate terrain. Early in the process it was evident, from what they told me, that the Indiana Film Commission would offer no financial considerations necessary for a viable project. After Edwards asked me to review and comment on the appropriateness of more than a dozen sites in Ohio and Pennsylvania, he selected a location in New York. The resulting film relies on terrain with more rock outcroppings, faster flowing rivers, and younger trees than Lincoln knew—but at least it is not prairie.

Clearly, Edwards sought stories in young Lincoln’s life that would artistically develop the relationships between the boy and his family. Much of the content is already well known: the arrival of Nancy Lincoln’s relatives—the Sparrows—with Dennis Hanks, the deaths of Nancy and the Sparrows in 1818 from milk sickness, the difficult time for the family without a mother to care for them, and the arrival of a stepmother and her children a little over a year later. Yet, in the film there is only one stepsister, whereas in fact there were two. Director Edwards explained this choice was intentional, as he sought to better manage the number of characters in the movie. Lincoln’s attending the Andrew Crawford school and his negative reaction to his friend’s mistreatment of animals, especially tortoises, is appropriately portrayed. The Lincoln family connection to the Primitive Baptist Church appears in a historically inaccurate scene: Lincoln’s family and neighbors surely would not have danced to celebrate the church opening.

Edwards finds significance in less well-known stories as well. One example is the dog-in-a-raccoon-skin story. Though William H. Herndon relates this story in a note in his 1889 work, the event rarely appears in Lincoln biographies—perhaps because it does not reflect our positive image of young Lincoln. Herndon says that Lincoln and his stepbrother sewed the skin from a dead raccoon onto the family’s little yellow housedog. Other dogs mistook the animal for a raccoon, and attacked and killed it. Herndon remarks that Thomas “was much incensed” when he learned of the dog’s death but does not record Thomas’s punishment for the boys.³

Edwards, however, uses this incident to portray young Lincoln’s honesty and character by having him admit to causing the dog’s death after all the other boys deny their involvement. Perhaps the event also helps us realize that even Abraham Lincoln made decisions that resulted in unforeseen negative consequences. This scene presents an opportunity to explore the relationship between Lincoln and his father. The screenwriter portrays Thomas Lincoln as a stern disciplinarian who whips the boy after this incident and after others requiring punishment. Such a father in the early nineteenth century was undoubtedly the norm. Certainly we do not see a Thomas Lincoln who beats his son for no reason, as some modern biographers imply. Rather, as a parent, Thomas attempts to harden the gentle Abraham to survive frontier life. What emerges is a father and son who view the world in very different ways and have difficulty communicating with each other.

But we see tenderness in the relationship, too. Thomas shows tough love for Abraham over his difficulty in accepting his new stepmother. Thomas teaches Abraham what he knows—carpentry, hunting, storytelling, and wrestling. It is true, however, that Thomas developed a closer bond with his stepson, John D. Johnston, than he did with Abraham, his own son.

The film, nevertheless, focuses on the relationships between Lincoln and his mothers. Both women loved Abraham and viewed him as gifted. Nancy, his birth mother, perceives Abraham as intellectually exceptional and knows she cannot offer all he needs to develop his talent. Sarah, his stepmother, also recognizes the boy’s uniqueness and desire for learning. Sarah slowly pulls Abraham out of his grief into acceptance of her. Indeed, while Thomas and John D. develop their strong bond, Abraham and Sarah cultivate an even stronger one.

In the film, two fictional episodes illustrate this bond. In the first, Abraham takes a trinket belonging to Sarah. The episode reveals how differently Thomas and Sarah view their roles as parents correcting a child’s misbehavior. The second incident arises from an account based on Bernadine Bailey’s 1941 book, *Abe Lincoln’s Other Mother: The Story of Sarah Bush Lincoln*. In this scene, the boy Lincoln leaves for several days to deliver hides to a tanner. Sarah misses him so much she can barely carry on her normal activities and then rejoices on his return. This journey also provides the obligatory scene of the boy Lincoln seeing slaves, presumably runaways, being returned across the Ohio River.

Another Indiana Lincoln legend arises briefly, maybe for ethnic inclusiveness—that of Native American Johnny Kongapod. Kongapod
is seen building a fence without any real interaction with Lincoln. This character is found in the 1893 work of Hezekiah Butterworth—a work described by the author as “freely mingled history, tradition, and fiction.” Though details of Kongapod’s life vary in later works, most references focus on Lincoln’s appreciation of the epitaph:

Here lies poor Johnnie Kongapod,
    Have mercy on him, gracious God,
    As he would do if he was God,
    And you were Johnnie Kongapod.\(^5\)

If director Edwards had shared the script with me before filming, I would have suggested a number of changes. I do believe, however, that this artistic film accomplishes the goal expressed to me in my first conversation with the filmmakers: depicting young Abraham Lincoln’s relationships with mother and stepmother. Black-and-white images, the playful field scenes, and the unusually low camera angles magnify the film’s artistry. These features, along with very limited dialogue, at times inaudible, result in an almost dreamlike, childlike memory.

*The Better Angels* acquaints the public with a period of Lincoln’s life that typically receives little attention except in children’s books. Many filmgoers will have questions about Abraham Lincoln’s boyhood in Indiana. I hope this curiosity compels them to read a book to learn more.

---

**Searching for the “Better Angels” of Historical Context**

JACKIE HOGAN

There are hundreds of Abraham Lincolns—in biographies and novels, in film and television, in museums and monuments. They range from folksy to mysterious, from whimsical to somber, and from such incarnations as Abe the humble rail-splitter, the frontier heartthrob,


the civil rights crusader, and the national martyr to Abe the cyborg, the extraterrestrial, and the vampire hunter.¹ No matter how imaginative or outlandish the depiction of Lincoln, he invariably embodies all-American ideals and virtues. He is a determined, practical, self-made man; he is brave, compassionate, and self-sacrificing. He embodies, in short, “the better angels of our nature.”

In A. J. Edwards’s film The Better Angels, we are immersed in Abraham Lincoln’s childhood world. It is 1817, and the Lincoln family lives in a rough-hewn cabin in the backwoods of Indiana. Young Abe spends his days chopping wood and plowing fields under the critical eye of a stern father, and exploring the wonders of nature with a loving, angelic mother. When she falls ill and dies, we see the boy’s stoic grief. And when his father brings home a new wife, we watch as the boy’s wariness gradually warms to love for his new, and equally angelic, stepmother. The film primarily focuses on only two years in Abe’s life, but Edwards aims to show us the “first traces of [Lincoln’s] maturity, eloquence, compassion, and scholarliness,” the first “hints of the destiny that awaits the future president.”²

The Better Angels, filmed in black and white, is visually striking. The camera lingers sensuously on rippling meadows, a rushing river, the stripped-bare branches of winter. The soundscape adds to the immersive quality of the film. Lonely winds, crackling fires, the distant laughter of children at play, and conspicuously sparse dialog give The Better Angels a haunting atmosphere. But while the film clearly aims to break new ground with an intimate childhood portrait of Lincoln, its nostalgic clichés ultimately reveal more about the preoccupations of twenty-first-century filmmakers and audiences than about the lived experiences of Lincoln himself. Indeed, while the film is, on the surface, an exploration of the childhood trials that shaped Lincoln, it is equally an expression of longing for a simpler, more innocent age, when men were men and a woman’s place was in the home, when Christianity permeated every realm of life, and children were hard-working, studious, reverent, and obedient.

Even while depicting some of the hardships the Lincolns endured, the film creates a profoundly Romantic vision of life on the nineteenth-century American frontier. Here brawny men, beautiful women, and cherubic children have a deep kinship with nature. The women and

children, in particular, marvel at the intricate structures of leaves and insects and icicles. They frolic in the grass, wear wildflowers in their hair, and wrap ribbons around a Maypole. Young Lincoln is constructed here as a Rousseauian “Natural Man,” uncorrupted by civilization, living in harmony with the natural world. The bucolic images and sentimental orchestral soundtrack cultivate desire for this seemingly less complicated and more wholesome time.

Adding to this air of wholesomeness are religious themes and images. Edwards presents a world that is steeped in Christian faith. The local schoolteacher leads his pupils through prayers and readings of scripture, and he quizzes them on the life of Jesus. Lincoln’s father helps build a new church, where the family goes to hear the minister exhort the congregation to Christian benevolence and service toward the greater good. Lincoln’s mother, in particular, is shown to be deeply religious. The narrator tells us that she is a “true believer,” focused on “yonder, always yonder.” When she dies, we watch as her spirit seems to rise from her deathbed, drawn toward the light that streams in through the window. Heavenly music swells to a crescendo as her soul departs. Young Abraham’s world is thus one of Christian certitude, without the spiritual and moral complexities faced by multiethnic societies today.

Likewise, gender roles are unambiguous in this frontier filmscape. Men tend crops, wield guns and axes, and apply the strap to disobedient sons, and women confine themselves to the home and garden, showering children with unconditional love and patience and tender caresses. The lead actors deliver convincing performances of these rather one-dimensional roles. Lincoln’s father is portrayed as a domineering but principled man by Jason Clarke, the ruggedly handsome Australian actor known primarily for his roles as gangsters, hard-nosed officers of the law, and working-class thugs. Thomas Lincoln is a man of few words, but his word is law within his own family, and no one dares challenge his authority. He teaches Abe and the young boys in his charge to hunt and wrestle and build things, and he disdains education as a waste of time. Young Abe, portrayed by beguiling newcomer Braydon Denney, appears desperate for his harsh father’s approval. “I wanna be as strong as you,” he shyly admits to his father. “You gonna be twice the man I am,” Thomas answers, giving his son a rough hug and presenting him with an axe—the towering patriarch bequeathing to his son this instrument of masculine power.

The women in Lincoln’s life are likewise largely one-dimensional and gender stereotypical. Lincoln’s mother and his stepmother, played respectively by the waifish Brit Marling and German model-turned-actress Diane Kruger, are implausibly flawless, both in their appearance (plain, homespun dresses do little to disguise their Hollywood perfection) and in their wifely and maternal devotion. Indeed, when Lincoln’s mother is laid to rest, his laconic father utters a simple prayer over her grave: “Take her, Lord, for she was yours from the beginnin’. N’ forgive her for her sins, though she committed none.” A woman without sin, she was quite simply the perfect, selfless, loving wife and mother.

Reviews of historical films commonly focus on questions of historical accuracy. In the case of *The Better Angels*, I leave these questions to historians to debate. Certainly the broad outlines of Lincoln’s childhood experiences—many of the events, people, and places featured in the film—appear to accord with historical records, as we would expect, given that boyhood Lincoln expert Bill Bartelt served as historical consultant for the production. But there are much more interesting questions than whether the names and dates and types of clothing or technologies or dialects featured in the film are historically authentic. After all, as historian Jane Lydon has observed, historical film is a “strange time machine” that transports us to times and places not “as they actually were,” but as we imagine them to have been. And, as such, these films tell us as much about those who create and consume them as about the events of the past.

*The Better Angels’* sentimental depictions of an ideal past—in which authority was clear (the white man, the father, ruled without challenge), children were nurtured by doting full-time mothers, and the community united around a single shared faith—reflect certain preoccupations of twenty-first-century America. The past fifty years have witnessed the civil rights movement, the women’s rights movement, the gay rights movement, an increase in secularization, greater racial, ethnic, and religious diversity, and challenges to traditional claims of authority and superiority. While these developments have opened new doors to previously marginalized groups, they have also called into question the easy answers of yesteryear. (“Because your father said so.” “Because God said so.” “Because the white man knows best.”) Instead of relying on the traditional social order, we must now grapple with trickier appraisals of merit and justice and equality. It is tempting to gaze back longingly toward an imagined simpler age that

---

forged men of courage and fortitude, men like Lincoln. Some might even advocate a return to male dominance, stay-at-home motherhood, and Christian doctrine in public school curricula as ways of molding more little Lincolns for our future.

In the dark cocoon of the movie theater it is easy to surrender to the romantic idyll of The Better Angels, unless, of course we remember that in this seemingly simpler age women were denied almost all rights to property, political voice, and basic self-determination; that people of African descent were treated as naturally inferior and often no more than chattel; that Catholics, Jews, and other religious outliers were ostracized for their supposedly false and dangerous beliefs; and that Native Americans were being expelled, corralled, and exterminated in the name of civilization and progress. In The Better Angels, the folksy narrator observes, “When a story larns ya a good lesson, it ain’t no lie.” Be that as it may, we should be skeptical of selective history lessons that seem to offer easy solutions for the complex social issues we face today.

Lincoln’s Boyhood in Black and White
MEGAN KATE NELSON

In the first seconds of The Better Angels, words, rather than images, appear. This device is unsurprising, for words almost always appear in the first seconds of movies about Abraham Lincoln. Why? Because although Lincoln is probably the most visually recognizable of our American presidents, we access him most often through his writing—the Gettysburg Address especially but also concise phrases that seem to perfectly capture the emotions and the ideas of mid-nineteenth-century America.

The words fade from the screen and orchestral music swells. We see a grand and empty building mostly from ground level, gazing up at its soaring columns from different angles. It is the Lincoln Memorial, of course—the building most associated with the man, after the log cabin in which he grew up. Again, this is unsurprising. Can one actually make a film about Lincoln and not include shots of the Memorial at some point? I stifle a yawn.

Then, a voice-over. “Wanna know what kind of boy he was?” asks a man with a drawly, gravelly voice. “Well, I myself, his cousin, am the only one livin’ know’d ‘im that early. Know’d ‘im the day he was born.”
Ah. So this will be a family drama, enacted in the wilderness. I perk up a little. In film, one rarely sees the boy Lincoln instead of the adult who deftly negotiates political shenanigans and wartime sadness (or kills vampires). This could be interesting.

Or it could be terrible, because Lincoln’s boyhood is possibly the most mythologized period of his heavily mythologized life. The log cabin, the dead mother, the kind stepmother, the desperately poor family, the intellectually voracious boy teaching himself to write on a shovel by the fire—all of these are motifs in countless books (many of them for children) about Lincoln’s youth. And they fit neatly into the American classic rags-to-riches story, a plot in all forms of popular culture but also a narrative that every politician must tell about him—or herself—in some form or another—to be elected these days. Early hardships, in the American vernacular, explain later greatness. We believe that character is forged in such struggles.

The Better Angels gives us this narrative over and over again. We experience young Abe (Braydon Denney’s first film role) through the eyes and the down-home, thickly southern words of his cousin Dennis Hanks (Cameron Mitchell Williams). Abe roams the woods, worshipping his mother Nancy and reveling in her love for him. Wind ruffles the leaves of countless tall trees. Abe silently spars with his father, Tom, who does not understand his son’s sensitive and willful nature, and punishes him for it.

When his mother dies of milk sickness, Abe is despondent. And then he is abandoned (along with his sister and Dennis) when his father heads to Kentucky to find work and leaves them alone over the winter. When Tom returns in the spring, he brings with him a new wife, Sarah, who has three of her own children in tow and a wagon full of furniture. Abe is initially cautious, and his relationship with his stepmother is potentially fractious (there is an incident with a necklace), but then he warms to her, and she to him. They chase one another around the fields, clamber up on fallen logs, whistle, and feed chickens together. It is Sarah who persuades Tom Lincoln to let his son go to school, where the schoolteacher (Wes Bentley) immediately recognizes Abe’s talents and teaches him to think deeply and shake hands properly.

Although A. J. Edwards, the director, wanted The Better Angels to be “immediate and visceral . . . as if life were unfolding in front of the camera,”¹ the film’s details establish the origin stories of several

---

later, mythic Lincolns. Abe takes the blame for bad deeds that are not entirely his doing, including the torture and ultimate death of the family dog—“Honest Abe!” His father sends him on a three-day trip to the tanner by himself; one day he wakes up and sees a slave coffle passing; he frowns—“The Great Emancipator!” Dennis accuses Abe of telling lies and reports his cousin’s response: “When a story learns you a good lesson, it ain’t no lie”—“The Wise Wordsmith!” Gradually his father comes to accept him, as Abe grows stronger and proves to be a surprisingly good wrestler. “You’re gonna be twice the man I am,” he says, as he gives Abe an axe—“The Rail Splitter!”

All of these vignettes occur in somewhat random order until, inevitably, we leap forward in time to “Easter, 1865.” Because no matter how different they might be, all films about Lincoln must end here. Dennis goes to tell Sarah the news. “I know’d they kill ‘im,” he says in the voiceover. “I been waitin’ for it. She never asked no questions. I reckon she thought she’d soon join ‘im.” A national tragedy, depicted here as a family trauma.

Finis.

All ninety-five minutes of the film are quiet. Even the laughter is solemn; this young Abe is tight-lipped and almost never cracks a smile. The director is a protégé of Terrence Malick (who produced the film), and their visual styles are quite similar: the film is shot in black and white—because, you know, it’s a film about history!—with wide-angle views that begin at ground or waist level and then swoop up to linger on treetops framed against the sky. There are long periods without dialogue in which the sounds of nature (wind, babbling streams, locusts) or that swelling orchestral music substitute for conversation. This is sometimes hypnotically effective, but it mostly seems pretentious. Several other reviewers have called the film a “tone poem,” which is not really a compliment.

I’m not sure I would call The Better Angels poetic; nor would I call it a historical film, although the viewer’s understanding that this boy is Abe Lincoln is vital to following its plot points and motifs. Otherwise, it’s just another movie about a young boy having some minor conflicts with his father and wandering around the woods. We don’t learn anything new about Lincoln or his life; we just see the president’s mythic origins in a moodier, more ostentatious way. In the end, the film falls somewhere between interesting and terrible; it is visually compelling but—unlike Abraham Lincoln himself—doesn’t have much to say.
The opening sequence of The Better Angels, the debut film by writer and director A. J. Edwards, evokes the young Lincoln as America’s Christ. It begins with something Lincoln reportedly said, set in angelic white letters on a black background: “All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother.” Then Anton Bruckner’s Symphony no. 8, often called The Apocalyptic, plays. The first image is of the chalice (one of two) just outside the Lincoln Memorial, shot from below and framed against the sky, as two birds fly past the past. The camera then moves inside the memorial and pans up to the ceiling (and heaven). The voiceover of Lincoln’s cousin Dennis Hanks (Hayes Blankenship speaking for the adult Hanks), “Want to know what kind o’ boy he was?,” prompts the cut to the first shots of the young Lincoln in Spencer County, Indiana, also framed against the sky. It is a cloud-filled, dramatic sky that seems alive, as if to evoke a living God, much as the birds that fly past the chalice evoke a living symbol, a cup capable of transposing wine into blood. Following the first close-up of the young Lincoln is another shot of treetops and heaven.

This theme of a God-infused Lincoln resonates in Edwards’s risky but brilliant decision to shoot the film in black and white. In his use


Roundtable: The Better Angels

of monochrome, arguably the film’s most striking feature, Edwards departed from his mentor, Terrence Malick, who conceived and produced the film.4 (He followed Malick by creating striking, poetic imagery and by using history as a muse.) It is a luminous, high-contrast monochrome, achieved partly by filming the movie in upstate New York in natural light that comes “horizontally at us,” as Edwards said, and partly through wide-angle and soft-focus distortions.5 The visual effect resembles the southern landscapes of the photographer Sally Mann, who inspired Matthew Lloyd, the film’s director of photography. Mann has said that her southern landscapes are “death-haunted,” haunted by the deaths of slaves, soldiers, and victims of lynching. Edwards’s film is Christ-haunted, haunted by Lincoln’s future as the nation’s redeemer.6

Edwards comes close to acknowledging as much. “I’d like to think . . . there was an outside force . . . which was guiding” the young Lincoln, he said in an interview. “Something like faith, or something like spirit that was always present.” In another interview, he compared his film with Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ, which influenced him:

You have a story that’s about Christ but you never name Christ. You never see Christ. You just feel him. . . . You get it through Miklos Rozsa’s score. That’s where Christ is most present in the


film. Just as in The Better Angels, the aim was for Lincoln’s character to be suggested through the music.\(^7\)

Edwards’s score evokes Lincoln as spiritual redeemer. It begins with Bruckner’s “apocalyptic” Symphony no. 8, followed by Vasily Kalinnikov’s Symphony no. 1, which is indebted to his training in sacred music. Richard Wagner’s prelude to act 1 of Lohengrin contrasts spiritual purity against worldly evil and evokes “a vision of the [Holy] Grail descending to earth.” “Star in the East,” a folk carol, refers to Bethlehem’s star. Alan Hovhaness’s symphonies (there are parts of three in the score) create a “reverential” and “mystical” atmosphere, according to the music critic Richard Buell. The first movement of John Adams’s Shaker Loops was so named because Adams sought to convey through his music the millennialist fervor of Shakers dancing. And Dvořák’s New World Symphony was indebted to Negro spirituals and their themes of Christian suffering and redemption.\(^8\)

There are also scenes foreshadowing the young Lincoln’s future as America’s Christ. After his cousins torture a dog by tying a raccoon skin to it, the dog runs frantically into the woods and is killed (off-screen) by other dogs. Although Abe did not participate in the offense, he confesses and is whipped, sacrificing himself for the sins of his cousins. His schoolteacher, Mr. Crawford (Wes Bentley), describes a similar act of Abe’s Christlike sacrifice.

Like Christ, the young Lincoln seems incapable of cruelty. When his cousins assault a turtle with a rock, Lincoln walks away. The scene prefigures the famous line from the Second Inaugural: “With malice toward none; with charity toward all.” In his characterization of


the young Lincoln, Edwards borrowed heavily from Eleanor Atkinson’s 1889 interview with Dennis Hanks, who was ninety at the time. Edwards seems to treat as gospel Hanks’s concluding assessment: “Thar was jist one thing Abe Lincoln didn’t know; he didn’t know how to be mean, to do a mean thing, or think a mean thought. When God made Old Abe he left that out fur other men to divide up among ’em.” Here is America’s young Christ, set apart from humanity by the better angels of his nature. As Edwards himself said, “We can see [in Lincoln] essentially the best we should be striving for.”9

And yet one of the film’s rich ironies is that despite its prefiguring of Lincoln as America’s Christ, from the opening sequence and the score to the scenes of Christlike sacrifice, it also authentically evokes Lincoln’s years in Indiana. Edwards aimed for “an experiential picture,” as he put it, “very immediate and visceral, as if life was unfolding in front of the camera,” enabling viewers “to really be in that world and walk with the Lincoln family and experience the sensual as well as the emotional.” Much if not most of the film achieves such verisimilitude. Edwards acknowledged that his film, like any historical feature film, is “about the process of marrying fiction and historical realities.” In doing so, he poetically portrays Lincoln’s life in Indiana from 1817 to 1819.10

There is thus a rich tension between inevitability and immediacy, between prefiguring a redeemer president and focusing on the young Lincoln’s present. Most of the film is devoted to the latter. It portrays a bright and ambitious nine-year-old boy who, amid the raw beauty of the backwoods, experiences the horrible death of his mother and learns how to accept and love a new stepmother and respect a father with whom he has little in common.


Despite Edwards’s heavy reliance on Dennis Hanks’s memories of Lincoln in Indiana, at least two contemporaries considered Hanks an unreliable witness. David Turnham, a friend and neighbor of Lincoln in Indiana, knew Hanks and said “he was not the truest man in the world—would dodge—equivocate and exaggerate.” And James Rardin, a newspaperman and Coles County native, called Hanks “a pretty big liar.” Wilson and Davis, Herndon’s Informants, 122, 651. This indispensable book also includes several letters from and interviews with Hanks in 1865 and 1866, twenty-five years prior to the Atkinson interview that Edwards relies on so heavily.

Edwards summarized the film’s thesis by saying that Lincoln “was saved by his two mothers. After the loss of his beloved, biological mother, . . . he is hurled into grief and despair. . . . But his stepmother arrives and she inspires him, loves him, encourages trust in him, and it’s by accepting her that he’s able to enter into the next chapter of his life.”11

But this summary is necessarily facile, for the film “eschews narrative linearity,” as the critic Sam Fragoso noted.12 There is also little dialogue, and so meaning is conveyed, the thesis evoked, through imagery fragmented by frequent jump cuts. Abe’s love for his mother, Nancy (Brit Marling), is evoked early in the film when she shows Abe a praying mantis resting on her fingers. Mother and son share a moment of wonder, of faith in the power of imagination. The scene is echoed by Hanks’s voice-over: “she was a believer. . . . She knew so much of what she felt was yonder; always yonder. . . . Her mind and his seemed to join together.”

Another poignant scene suggests Abe’s acceptance of his stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln (Diane Kruger). After Nancy dies from “milk sickness” (brucellosis), Abe withdraws emotionally, and when Sarah arrives he virtually ignores her. His father (Jason Clarke) encourages him: “She can’t stand on the ground forever, son,” he tells him amid the tall summer corn. “It’s like the corn. It has to grow or give.” Sarah too, reaches out to him: “I’ll never take your mother’s place. But I love you same as she did. If you choose to love me less, I’ll still love you the same.”13 The emotional connection occurs in a beautiful scene in which Sarah initiates a balancing game on a log with Abe.

In another dramatic arc, Abe comes to respect his father. An accomplished carpenter and farmer, Thomas knows how to survive in the backwoods. But he has no sympathy for Abe’s love of books and dreams “of yonder,” as Thomas Hanks put it. It “pestered his pappy a heap to have him writing all over everything,” Hanks says in the voice-over. Father and son lived in different worlds: Abe’s dreams of yonder and Thomas’s dedication to sustaining his extended family in a harsh and unsparing world. But near the end of the film, Thomas wrestles with Abe (along with Abe’s cousins and stepbrother), teaching them how

13. Nancy Lincoln’s death from milk sickness is foreshadowed by a cow eating a poisonous, snakeroot plant (the source of the bacterial disease), by Nancy milking, and by a shot of a dead cow.
to defend themselves. He encourages Abe and praises his improvement. “That’s good,” he yells, lifting Abe up so that they are face to face. “That’s good,” he repeats, shaking his son with excitement. It is the most intimate, and poignant, scene between father and son in the movie. Abe then tells Thomas, “I wanna be as strong as you,” to which Thomas responds, “You’re a good boy. Ma would be real proud of you. . . . You’ll be twice the man I am.” Abe’s newfound respect for Thomas is echoed by Hanks’s voice-over, which functions as a historical voice and instructs the audience to respect Thomas as well: “Everybody runs father down. Never gave him credit for what he was. He made a good living. He kept his word. He paid his way. Not everyone did that.”

In these familial scenes, the film beautifully marries historical fact to the genre of fiction. Edwards relied on several Lincoln scholars, notably William E. Bartelt, the film’s historical consultant. He said that the only “fabricated” scene “was the sighting of slaves; there’s no documentation of that” in Indiana. Edwards also achieves his aim of immediacy that captures the felt experience of the past, “as if life was unfolding in front of the camera.”

But what gets in the way of this poetic and experiential rendering is the foreshadowing of Lincoln as the nation’s redeemer. An experiential approach to the past emphasizes history’s contingencies—the things that happen as if by chance and without explanation—rather than a sense of inevitability. Such contingencies are suggested by the frequent jump cuts and fragmented, visual narrative. But they are undermined by the portrayal of the young Lincoln as a pensive, spiritual, “always yonder” boy incapable of cruelty and destined to become the nation’s redeemer. Some sense of the humorous Lincoln, the lover of southwestern humor and precursor of Mark Twain, would have helped this film immeasurably, for one doesn’t usually associate America’s Christ with tall tales and bawdy jokes. Virtually everyone who knew Lincoln acknowledged his humorous side. As Hanks told Atkinson, “he always did have fits o’ cuttin’ up.” Then too, a scene of

Abe being kicked by a horse and presumed dead, which happened to Lincoln while in Indiana, would have underscored the contingencies of the past.  

Despite these flaws, however, the cinematic poetry of *The Better Angels* resonates with Lincoln’s own poetry about Spencer County, Indiana. While living in Springfield in the mid-1840s, Lincoln returned to his “childhood home” for the first time since moving to Illinois in 1830. The trip inspired “My Child-Hood Home I See Again,” which he penned in early 1846:

My childhood home I see again,  
And gladden with the view;  
And still as mem’ries crowd my brain,  
There’s sadness in it too.

O memory! thou mid-way world  
Twixt Earth and Paradise,  
Where things decayed, and loved ones lost  
In dreamy shadows rise.

And freed from all that’s gross or vile,  
Seem hallowed, pure, and bright,  
Like scenes in some enchanted isle,  
All bathed in liquid light.

...  

Now twenty years have passed away,  
Since here I bid farewell  
To woods, and fields, and scenes of play  
And school-mates loved so well.

Where many were, how few remain  
Of old familiar things!  
But seeing these to mind again  
The lost and absent brings.

The friends I left that parting day—  
How changed, as time has sped!  
Young childhood grown, strong manhood grey,  
And half of all are dead.

I hear the lone survivors tell
How nought from death could save,
Till every sound appears a knell,
And every spot a grave.

I range the fields with pensive tread,
And pace the hollow rooms;
And feel (companions of the dead)
I’m living in the tombs.19

...  

Lincoln’s poem draws attention to life’s fleeting shadows and twists of fate that get obscured by the Christ-haunted Lincoln of the film.