Review Essay

Telling the Story of “The Ages”

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Standing at the foot of the bed in which Abraham Lincoln had just been pronounced dead, Edwin M. Stanton reportedly declared “Now he belongs to the ages.” For nearly 150 years “the ages” have perpetuated Lincoln’s place in American culture. Most of what we know about Lincoln has surfaced since his death. Much of what Americans have accomplished—both for themselves and for the world—has been done with one eye focused ahead and the other scrutinizing Lincoln in the rearview mirror. The two volumes under review assert that the story of “the ages” is worth telling. Both tell the story differently, but neither is the first to make such an attempt.

The story began to be told at the turn of the twentieth century in the form of annotations, provenance descriptions, and debates about the authenticity of Lincoln manuscripts.1 Collectors created lists that grew into bibliographies with annotations—Jay Monaghan inventoried the published books and pamphlets about Lincoln, Frederick Hill Meserve tracked down photographs, F. Lauriston Bullard examined statuary.2


2. Frederick Hill Meserve, The Photographs of Abraham Lincoln (New York: privately
As academic historians moved into a very crowded Lincoln field in the 1930s, they revised the story into a historiographical justification for their belated interest in the sixteenth president. James G. Randall laid down the dominating divide by complaining that “the hand of the amateur has rested heavily upon Lincoln studies” and calling for the professionalization of the field. Randall’s student David Herbert Donald placed the work of William Henry Herndon on the amateur side of the line and Herndon’s informants on the extreme “lunatic fringe.” Benjamin P. Thomas polished the storyline by structuring his narrative about previous Lincoln biographers around a continuing struggle between idealists and realists. In time, other historians explored the development of Lincoln’s “legend,” his “theme,” his “image,” and the “tradition” of interpreting him. The end result placed the “objective” “truth” about Lincoln in primary sources and the work of modern scholars while consigning the “myths” and “legends” to the “ages” dominated by amateurs after his death.

Two recent strains of scholarship have served to broaden the storyline. First, Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis have been working for roughly two decades to publish transcriptions of Herndon’s informant testimony (1998) and correspondence (forthcoming), making a


5. For a recent example, see Edward Steers Jr., Lincoln Legends: Myths, Hoaxes, and Confabulations Associated with Our Greatest President (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007).
case along the way for the reexamination of Herndon’s interviews and a revival of his reputation. Michael Burlingame and Allen C. Guelzo followed suit in their respective resuscitations of the interviews by John Nicolay and Josiah Holland. Second, the concept of memory—still contrasted to academic history—has opened new opportunities for analysis. In *Lincoln in American Memory*, Merrill D. Peterson surveyed in impressive fashion the wide-ranging interest in Lincoln expressed not only by academics, but also by collectors, enthusiasts, local historians, artists, playwrights, and community organizers. Peterson concluded that Lincoln’s memory continues to circulate in five themes: Savior of Union, Great Emancipator, Man of the People, First American, and Self-Made Man. David Blight and Barry Schwartz have employed memory to examine the deterioration of race relations in the late nineteenth century and the construction of American nationalism in the early part of the twentieth. The books under review continue to look for new evidence, expand the cast of participants, and contextualize interpretations of Lincoln within American history, memory, and culture.

*Looking for Lincoln* chronicles the first half of the “ages” by exploring the memory of Lincoln from his death to the death of his son Robert in 1926. The lavishly illustrated volume is organized, as the late David Donald explained in the foreword, as “a book of discovery”—it follows not the life of Lincoln but the story of the revelation of facts and information about him after his death (vii). Part one of the book treats Lincoln’s assassination through the hanging of four of the conspirators, mingling the mourning of all Americans (Northern, Southern, and African American) with glimpses into the identities, pursuit, capture, and trial of the alleged conspirators. Part two introduces an era from 1865 to 1876 (which coincidentally parallels Reconstruction) in which Lincoln’s friends and family begin to craft his image and biography. In part three, the memory of Lincoln is “betrayed” from 1876

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to 1889 by the abandonment of federal reconstruction, an attempt to rob Lincoln’s tomb, a flood of reminiscences by people more distantly connected with Lincoln, and the controversial biography by William Herndon. At the turn of the century, covered in part four, Lincoln is rescued by the massive biography by his secretaries John G. Nicolay and John Hay, the preservation of the Gettysburg battlefield, and the discovery of new sources. In the end, Lincoln’s “Unfinished Work” is redeemed in part five by the extensive celebration of the centennial of his birth in 1909, the reunion at Gettysburg in 1913, the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in 1922, and the donation of his papers to the Library of Congress in 1923. By the time of Robert Lincoln’s death in 1926, Southerners “honored” Lincoln’s memory, and African Americans accepted Lincoln’s flaws but could “still admire, and even love him” (452, 455).

As the Kunhardts tell the story, though Lincoln lived to see the end of the Civil War, he left behind a nation strongly divided about his legacy. For more than six decades, Lincoln’s memory was attacked—by Southerners, by those who retreated from his policies, and by those like William Herndon or Ward Hill Lamon who sought only to profit from Lincoln’s association. Despite such an onslaught, a small circle of witnesses—family members and close friends—guarded Lincoln’s memory. As long as they lived they stood as a bulwark against the cynics, the revisionists, and the mythologizers. Thus, a major theme of the narrative documents the deaths of Lincoln’s associates—cabinet members, his family, his friends, and ultimately his last living son. African Americans also helped sustain Lincoln’s memory because emancipation was its “central concept” (298). The compilers of this volume rejoice that neither Herndon nor Lamon made money from their biographies and pin the blame on Herndon for “help[ing] create the Lincoln of American folklore” (291). If, as they note, “Lincoln’s name was being used for a wide range of political purposes” by the twentieth century, it was primarily because “his close friends, who in earlier times had often corrected the public record, were no longer around to speak out” (433).

But as one generation of guardians passed on, another arose. In 1897 Frederick Hill Meserve began illustrating the Civil War memoirs of his father, who had been wounded at Antietam and met Lincoln twice. Meserve soon developed a passion for Lincoln and became “the preeminent collector of American photography and eventually the world authority on the portraiture of Abraham Lincoln” (363). In time he grew close to Robert Lincoln, published his findings, and developed a numeric coding system for Lincoln photographs (418–19,
His daughter, Dorothy Meserve Kunhardt, assisted with and then inherited the work of her father before passing it on to Meserve’s grandson, the late Phil Kunhardt, who was the father and grandfather of the compilers of Looking for Lincoln (xi–xii, 461).

The strengths of this handsome volume are clearly visible. Eleven inches tall, nine-and-a-half inches wide, and an inch-and-a-half thick, the 474 pages contain more than one thousand high-quality photographs and weigh in at nearly five pounds—hefty history indeed! There is almost palpable excitement upon viewing Lincoln’s rocking chair, Booth’s dagger and derringer, and Theodore Roosevelt’s ring containing a lock of Lincoln’s hair. The bright colors of centennial commemorative postcards flash off the page, while the juxtaposition of before and after shots of the hanging of the convicted conspirators leave one’s stomach in a lurch. Judicious selections from primary sources dot nearly every photospread, and the sources and images are united by brief narrative entries that pull the reader into the story with juicy backstories, connections, and interesting insights. Tucked away at the very end is a gallery showing all known photographs of Abraham Lincoln—114 glimpses into the face of Lincoln—that are now newly organized with an expandable numbering system developed in consultation with Lincoln scholars and collectors. The Kunhardts add to the study of Lincoln’s memory by integrating the legacy of his Indian policy, drawing attention to subsequent debates about African American colonization, and by discovering a very interesting application of Lincoln to the late nineteenth-century debates about religion and higher criticism. The volume marks probably the single best place in which to savor the most favorable morsels of Lincoln’s memory.

The combination of primary source text, visual sources, and brief narratives produces richly satisfying results marred only by the admittedly difficult task of documenting such a wide variety of sources. Primary sources quoted in the 180 sidebars are cited in the source notes (476–79), but the hundreds of sources quoted within the narrative go uncited. Not all of the photographs are described with captions, and some captions are vague, such as “White House during the Lincolns’ day” (178). Many of the estimated one thousand photographs are connected to repositories, but not to specific collections, in the picture credits (493–4). Those without any citation, the reader is informed, belong to either the Meserve-Kunhardt Collection or the Mellon Collection. When the photographs present such engaging artifacts as Lincoln’s hat or Booth’s diary or the curiosities housed in Ford’s Theatre, only the photographs’ whereabouts are identified, leaving the location of the object unstated. And at times small errors muddy the waters:
Tad Lincoln’s conversation with Gideon Welles is dated on both April 15 and May 15 (58), Lincoln lived in Kentucky until age 7 not Indiana (165), and in 1909 Kentuckians were not interested in commemorating Lincoln’s birth (404).

The Kunhardts end their narrative in 1926, slightly after the point where David Blight ended his study of the Civil War in American memory and at roughly the same place where Barry Schwartz left readers of his *Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory*, published in 2000 as the first of a proposed two-volume work on Lincoln in memory. Like Blight, the Kunhardts traced a decline in public commitment to Lincoln’s emancipation message and memory. But whereas Blight located the shift in a conscientious move toward regional white reconciliation, the Kunhardts say only vaguely that World War I led Americans to desire “Lincoln the Statesman” (437). Schwartz made a much more wide-ranging and theoretically grounded case for quite a similar conclusion by showing how the Progressive generation found new uses for Lincoln as a symbol of inclusion for immigrants, as an example of state power for progressive reformers, and as a guide for both capitalists and socialists who saw in Lincoln both a confidence in open markets and a compassion for the working class. In short, Lincoln became a symbol that helped forge a sense of American nationalism in the early twentieth century.8

Schwartz has been working on the second volume, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era*, for over a decade. The sophistication of his first volume combined with the intervening publication of some of his most tantalizing findings about Ann Rutledge and about Lincoln iconography have certainly primed the pump of reader interest in the rest of the story.9 Once again, however, Schwartz explains that this volume does not complete the journey; he promises yet another work that will show the original meaning of the Gettysburg Address, how it was ignored at the turn of the century, how its meaning changed during the world wars, and how recent historians have “revised that meaning entirely” (xiii).


If the Kunhardts touch only lightly on other historiographical literature, Schwartz again digs in for a fight. In the first volume he challenged the then-dominant “politics of memory school” for overemphasizing the power of the conservative elite to manipulate popular opinion. In this round, Schwartz takes on the “new structural memory” that posits that memory can be collective only if it rests in symbols outside of individuals, such as places (as argued by Pierre Nora), objects (Richard Terdiman), or institutions (Michael Schudson and Mary Douglas). Within the study of Lincoln’s memory, Schwartz specifically targets Peterson’s *Lincoln in American Memory* for examining the texts and symbols created by historians, writers, painters, sculptors, and architects while making “no effort to explain why different agents portray Lincoln in different ways, and whether these portrayals conform to what the average American believes about him” (3).

Schwartz’s key to the beliefs of the average American—and the crux of his entire argument—rests in a series of public opinion surveys, from Gallup Polls conducted over the past 60 years (in 1945, 1956, 1975, 1991, and 1999) to independent surveys conducted at the turn of the twenty-first century. Schwartz devotes several appendices to explaining (soundly, I believe) the survey methods, their limitations, and his efforts to compare disparate data sets. The result comes through clear and unmistakable: Over the second half of the twentieth century Lincoln’s prestige fell, and his reputation transformed from being celebrated as the Savior of the Union to being conceived solely as the Great Emancipator. “Old beliefs about Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War have been revised, scaled down, and refitted to a post-heroic society based on universal recognition and inclusion” (19).

Schwartz maps the decline and transition of Lincoln’s memory onto a rigid generational outline in a sort of double helix that structures the book’s development. Schwartz opens with a rich textual analysis of Lincoln’s memory among the “G.I. Generation” of the 1930s, from the deference displayed in asking “What Would Lincoln Do?” to the epic representations in art. Lincoln reached his apex in popular opinion during World War II when his experiences were invoked to give meaning to a new crisis, to orient and clarify the public need, and to inspire soldiers in war and comfort families in death. During the cold war period from 1945 to 1965, Lincoln’s image leveled as the “Rights and Justice Generation” found useful comparisons in communism and slavery but grew increasingly preoccupied with civil rights. As the “Rebellious Generation” came of age after 1965, Lincoln became pigeonholed as the Great Emancipator while his other attainments were forgotten. By the 1980s, the “Uncommitted Generation” found itself awash in a
postmodern culture of eroding authority and multiculturalism. In an era of “benign ridicule,” Lincoln’s esteem descended through changing presentations in school textbooks, decreasing visitation to historic sites, and such demeaning graphic representations of him wearing sunglasses or standing arm in arm with a flirtatious Marilyn Monroe. Schwartz concludes with a final chapter on “Inertia” in which he makes a case that the collective weight of monuments, history, and the modern “Lincoln establishment” create a threshold of memory such that Lincoln will never entirely leave American culture.

Schwartz makes a clear contribution to the study of Lincoln’s memory in pushing Peterson, Blight, and the Kunhardts beyond artifacts, texts, and symbols into American politics, popular culture, and public opinion. While it generally has been assumed that Lincoln’s prestige declined—Peterson made the same observation—no one has so thoroughly documented the transition before. Chapters 2 (on the 1930s) and 5 (on the erosion of Lincoln’s prestige) present particularly nuanced pictures of the regional, racial, and ideological variations in Lincoln’s memory—Southerners, blacks, and whites liked and disliked Lincoln for various reasons at various times and cannot be lumped into a simple “Anti-Lincoln tradition” or “Black image.” That the civil rights movement challenged Lincoln’s prestige has been known since the 1960s, but Schwartz is especially perceptive to note that cold war-era critiques of communism broke the ice by shifting attention to Lincoln and slavery. Within memory studies, the concept of inertia is a welcome addition to the longstanding dichotomous analytical categories of memory and amnesia.

If Schwartz convincingly documents the transformation of Lincoln’s reputation and the decline of his prestige, he is less persuasive in explaining the causes of the changes. In what becomes a rather circular argument, Schwartz reasons that “the primary condition of Lincoln’s descent is the fading of the concept of greatness itself” (xii). Greatness, in turn, declined because of the great disruption of post-industrial society with its psycho-historical dislocation, tarnished idols, and the eroding acids of diversity and equality. This post-modern condition came about, as Lyotard argued, because humans abandoned grand narratives (national) for petit narratives (local, communal, and individual). Schwartz therefore concludes that “[t]he postmodern era is, plainly, a post-heroic era” (148). The book’s prose suffers an abrupt shift from Schwartz’s compelling textual analysis in chapters 1 to 3 to a sound but more stiff elaboration of survey data in chapters 4 to 6. The book’s editors seem to have ignored the absence of (or purged) entire footnotes necessary to document quoted newspaper articles (22,
70), the works of D. W. Griffith (51) and Mario Cuomo (127–28), David Blight’s key work on Civil War memory (131), and the records of book acquisitions (26) and site visitor statistics (154) used by Schwartz to make his case.

In the acknowledgements, Schwartz laid out his disciplinary pickets, as it were, to protect himself from methodological criticism by observing that the “Lincoln community” composed of “[m]ainly historians and political scientists” has “never invoked disciplinary privilege to dismiss sociological understandings of Lincoln and his legacy” (xv). As someone with degrees in both sociology and history, I do want to comment briefly on his union of methodologies. In his skillful use of public opinion surveys Schwartz brings a refreshing breath of air to what often become rather stuffy theoretical debates about collective memory. He compares survey results deftly and humbly acknowledges that they provide “no substitute” for the way narratives “frame individual experience” (4). He praises the surveys’ open response sections for allowing Americans to speak about Lincoln “in their own words” (118) yet, he quotes only briefly from those responses (118–122).10 In order to place a date on the transformation of Lincoln’s reputation, Schwartz analyzes forty textbooks, conveniently selected “from the library of a highly reputable school of education” (131). In contrast to his sophisticated coding of survey responses, Schwartz compares the textbooks’ content generically to conclude that they “move in the same direction” as the survey data (132). More startlingly, especially in light of his earlier criticisms of theories of memory that overemphasize the power of the elite, Schwartz reasons that the textbooks “reveal most of what Americans learned about Lincoln’s historical role” (185). Educational researchers who used textbooks as sources are loath to grant so much authority to the books that students often hate and rarely read, preferring instead arguments that situate textbook reading within a wider “cultural curriculum.”11

These new contributions by Schwartz and the Kunhardts are welcome additions to our understanding of the story of “the ages.” First, it becomes clear that Peterson’s *Lincoln in American Memory* is the essential starting place for studying this story. His categories suffuse Schwartz’s work and give structure to the Kunhardts’ chronicle. Sec-


ond, the formerly narrow focus of historiography has been broadened to include written and visual sources, artifacts and artwork, statuary and survey results, and commemoration and culture.

Third, a broad consensus is emerging about a timeline for Lincoln’s prestige that posits a rise after his death and a fall in the late twentieth century. The Kunhardts place the high-water mark at the 1909 centennial, Peterson thinks it came later in the 1930s, and Schwartz puts the apex at World War II. Fourth—and for its distinction from number three we are indebted to Schwartz—we can also identify shifts within the content of Lincoln’s reputation. Both Blight and the Kunhardts demonstrate that emphasis on emancipation declined in the late nineteenth century, and Schwartz has ably shown its revival in the late twentieth century. It is interesting to juxtapose the prestige and reputation to observe that Lincoln’s prestige rose as emphasis on emancipation lessened while his prestige fell as emphasis on emancipation increased.

Fifth, an engaging debate is forming about the agents of change in this story. The Kunhardts emphasize elements internal to the field of Lincoln studies—another witness speaks, a new source is found, a collection of papers is opened. Peterson and the historiographers before him are more attuned to developments within the discipline of history—historiographical debates, methodological trends, and changing scholarly interests. Schwartz brings the welcome reminder that developments external to the field and discipline are also important—Watergate’s impact on presidential authority, the growth of science and technology, and the changing societal roles of women and immigrants. The concept of generations appears quite regularly. Peterson and the Kunhardts emphasize a significant transition from the generation that knew Lincoln to the generation that did not, and Schwartz keys his analysis to four twentieth-century generations. Both the Kunhardts and Schwartz show how deaths—of both close acquaintances and subsequent presidents—revive and refocus discussions about Lincoln. However, generations are amorphous, and their influence is hard to measure. For example, Schwartz attributes Lincoln’s stature in the 1930s to the congressmen of the era who had been born in the nineteenth century and remained influential, but he later cites the teenagers of the 1960s for changing Lincoln’s reputation (despite the fact that the teens did not write the textbooks or produce the movies).

The work of the Kunhardts and of Schwartz reminds us that much more can be done to contextualize findings about Lincoln within a broader history. The Kunhardts discuss Birth of a Nation and Stone Mountain without reference to the second Ku Klux Klan; they note
race riots in Springfield but nowhere else (there is no entry on race in the index); they tie up their story with Southerners “honoring” Lincoln in the 1920s without noting the Southern Renaissance, neo-Confederate statues in Kentucky, and the popularity of Gone with the Wind. Schwartz ably demonstrates that Lincoln’s decline in prestige parallels a decline among presidents generally, but he cites the drop in visitors to Lincoln sites without noting a similar decline at other sites; he counts fewer statues to Lincoln without noting the twentieth-century utilitarian shift in commemoration away from monuments toward buildings and highways. Schwartz discusses the submersion of Lincoln’s birthday into Presidents’ Day without seeing it in the context of the rise of Black History Month. Throughout the literature, references have been made to early twentieth century questioning of “What would Lincoln do?” without ever noting that the question of what Jesus would do filled dozens of Christian novels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (the late-twentieth-century craze is an explicit revival of the former effort).

Ironically, one seemingly key question about Lincoln iconography remains unexplored. The cover of the Kunhardt volume features Lincoln’s top hat. The hat is preserved in the Treasures Gallery at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum in Springfield, and it has become (with the beard) the ubiquitous iconic symbol of Lincoln—so much so that a Hispanic fifth grader interviewed by one of my students in Texas this year identified Lincoln simply as “the guy with the big hat and long beard.” Yet, a quick search of the Kunhardt gallery reveals only one occasion on which Lincoln was photographed wearing the hat. In their survey of the Lincoln in popular print, Harold Holzer, Gabor Boritt, and Mark Neely displayed only a single lithograph from 1865 that depicted Lincoln in his hat. Schwartz analyzes a twenty-first-century statue of Lincoln and Davis at Vicksburg National Military Park that depicts both men holding their hats, but most statues do not. But the Kunhardts also present photographs of Lincoln associates in top hats—his servant Charles Forbes (89), his relative Dennis Hanks (92), and all of the fraudulent photographs of Lincoln imposters (422). So with such a spare historical record, how has the hat become so integral to Lincoln’s iconic image?

14. Holzer, Boritt, and Neely, The Lincoln Image, 185. The authors comment on Lincoln’s depiction in front of his Springfield home, but ignore his hat.
Hopefully a greater attention to the changing contexts of the past 150 years will lead future tellers of the story of “the ages” away from contrasting their findings to some kind of single, objective Lincoln standard. Schwartz proposes to test his findings to see “how closely [public] beliefs conform to historians’ and commemorative artists’ accounts,” and he therefore chooses the work of six twenty-first-century historians and himself to serve as the “rough standard” for the “real Lincoln” (4, 14). Both historiography and the story of Lincoln’s memory flow like rivers through time, so picking an arbitrary point in one time to evaluate some point in the other seems strained at best. Once we set aside the desire to squish popular interest in Lincoln into historiographical boxes we will better to see how Lincoln remains a strong fixture of the present. Tony Horwitz found the Civil War in attics and lives across the south; Andrew Ferguson found Lincoln everywhere; and a senator from Illinois made Lincoln a guide for yet another successful presidential campaign.15 Let “the ages” roll on.