Review Essay

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With more than a dozen elegantly written studies of Lincoln, his associates, and the Civil War period from David Donald’s hand over the last six decades, he has earned our respect and builds our anticipation for each new book. He does not disappoint us in this latest effort. After carefully laying out his criteria and the peculiarities of Lincoln’s childhood and maturation, he chooses six of Lincoln’s friends for analysis and discussion. Therein lays a challenge. Any group of Lincoln scholars could create such a six-person list—likely with considerable overlap—but still there would be strongly held differences about those selected. Many might insist on a friends list of at least a dozen or more for a president of Lincoln’s proclivity for friendship, and some would want to include a circle of twenty-five or more. Most would probably agree with Donald that Lincoln had few if any confidants and emphasize the complexity of his relationships with people. They also would agree with Lincoln’s law partner and biographer William Henry Herndon (and author Donald) that he was “the most shut-mouthed man” who ever lived concerning his personal life and thoughts.

Donald prepared himself for his task by visiting “the extensive literature on . . . friendship” from Eudora Welty, psychiatrists, and philosophers, including Immanuel Kant, Michel de Montaigne, St. Thomas Aquinas, Cicero, and Aristotle. The last named provided three basic categories that Donald applied to those considering themselves friends of Lincoln: “enjoyable” friendships, “useful” friendships, and “perfect” or “complete” friendships. Donald thinks there is “too little evidence” in “surviving records” to include Ward Hill Lamon, Norman Buel Judd, Leonard Swett, Gideon Welles, Edwin McMasters Stanton, Frederick Douglass, and Ulysses S. Grant in Lincoln’s close circle (xv–xvi). His choices are Joshua Speed, Herndon, Orville Hickman Browning, William Henry Seward, John Milton Hay, and John George Nicolay.

Regrettably, he does not include Mary Todd Lincoln, which he
explains by writing, “the closeness of husband and wife is basically different from that of friends.” And further, she “is such an important, and difficult, figure...that she deserves separate treatment” and “has received it in Jean H. Baker’s excellent” biography (xvii, 221). One can agree with the value of Baker’s biography and still be concerned about those who may never read it or those who accept Herndon’s characterization of her without knowledge of the critical role she played in Lincoln’s political career. Further, there is intense interest in Donald’s evaluation of the extent and quality of her influence relative to others. Not all marriages include the element of friendship, perhaps only a minor fraction, but this one did. In addition, her interests particularly influenced his politics, as Baker’s chapter “The Politics of Marriage” clearly demonstrates. She went to Washington with him when few congressional wives did so, to live in a rooming house with her two boys. She influenced him against becoming the territorial governor of Oregon, which he might otherwise have accepted. The couple counted votes and probabilities together in the senatorial campaigns. She traveled to Alton to witness the debate with Douglas, assuaged her husband’s depression after two lost Senate campaigns, and she charmed news reporters who came to Springfield in 1860. If things were different in the Executive Mansion, it had to do with her inadequate coping mechanisms, not because she did not try. She could be difficult, but she still counted in his day-by-day politics and life until April 14, 1865.

David Donald begins with a chapter on Lincoln’s childhood and his somewhat delayed adolescence in New Salem, noting that he had grown up without a close childhood friend or chum. Calling on psychiatric advice and the assistance of psychoanalyst and Lincoln biographer Charles Strozier, Donald sketches a maturing Lincoln who was neither experienced in nor capable of close personal attachments. Nevertheless, in his twenty-eighth year he found his one true friend in Joshua Speed. They shared many confidences in the next four years. Politics, on which they agreed, provided one center of interest; and there were many others, including literature, and crucially, engagement crises in which first Speed and then Lincoln helped the other through the mysteries of understanding commitment to their future spouses. Had not Speed been sublimely happy after marrying, there is doubt whether Lincoln would have sustained his own promise to Mary Todd. Later, following Speed’s

return to Kentucky, they separated on the politics of slavery. Yet Speed found many ways to assist his friend, especially in the early part of the war when the allegiance of Kentucky was in doubt. Donald succeeds in presenting this key relationship in a most revealing and enlightening manner.

Because Donald was frequently asked during his 1995–1996 book tour about possible homoerotic tendencies of Lincoln, he takes a deliberate approach in examining the evidence in both the Speed relationship and a later and shorter attachment to Captain David Derickson, who was detailed with the 150th Pennsylvania Volunteers in 1862 to protect the Lincolns in their summer retreat at the Soldiers’ Home in Washington. In two separate discussions totaling ten pages, he rejects each case as evidence of a homoerotic relationship, bolstering his argument with the concurrence of named psychiatric and psychoanalytical professionals. Each case included a period of loneliness and depression. Two men sleeping together in a double bed in mid-nineteenth-century America was not indicative of anything except the scarcity of accommodations.

Two of Lincoln’s senior law partners (John Todd Stuart and Stephen Trigg Logan) and a fellow politician (Edward Dickinson Baker) Lincoln liked very much do not make the friendship cut in Donald’s judgment. Stuart met Lincoln during the Black Hawk War and became a mentor by encouraging him to study law, lending him law books, and eventually taking him on as a fifty-fifty-split partner in 1837. Stuart had been elected to the state legislature in 1832 (Lincoln ran unsuccessfully), and when Lincoln was elected two years later, the two worked closely together as political allies under Stuart’s tutelage. Stuart defeated Stephen A. Douglas for Congress in 1838, which left the joint practice largely in Lincoln’s hands for much of the time until Lincoln left to join Logan in 1841 when Stuart won a second term in Congress. Stuart and Lincoln split politically when Lincoln became a Republican in 1856. Sometimes people outgrow their mentors. Stuart ran successfully against Lincoln’s political ally Leonard Swett, the Republican candidate for Congress in 1862, but he supported the war while opposing emancipation.

For the three years 1841 to 1844, Lincoln practiced with Logan, who ran unsuccessfully for the seat vacated by Lincoln in 1849. Donald excluded consideration of Logan on the basis of rivalry within the Whig party for the opportunity to run for Congress. In the relationship with Lincoln, however, Logan had other values. Lincoln biographer Benjamin P. Thomas wrote: “The association
with Logan became one of the most constructive influences in Lincoln’s life.… Logan showed him the value of exactitude and thorough preparation as opposed to mere cleverness and high-flown rhetoric.” Lincoln knew what he was getting into by joining Logan at a lesser fee split (one-third) than he had with Stuart, but Lincoln wanted to learn to write and think more clearly. As Thomas wrote, Logan was known for being “Methodical, industrious, painstaking, and precise, he had not only grounded himself in precedents and method, but was a student of the philosophy of the law as well.” Lincoln left the practice amicably when Logan wished to join with his son. Following Zachary Taylor’s election in 1848, the same year Logan lost the congressional election, Lincoln sought unsuccessfully to have Logan named to the federal bench.

Edward Baker was elected as a Whig to the Illinois legislature two years after Lincoln, and they became friends and also party rivals. Baker preceded Lincoln as Logan’s junior law partner, a position Lincoln obtained because he was thought to be more financially responsible than Baker. He accepted a promised Whig rotation in candidates, giving Lincoln his turn in 1846. The Lincolns named their second son Edward in Baker’s honor following his upholding of this agreement. After returning from the Mexican War, Baker moved to Galena where he was again elected to Congress. He migrated to California two years later, and there he lost elections for the Senate and for Congress. He moved again to Oregon and won election to the U.S. Senate as a Republican with support from Douglas Democrats because of his acceptance of the “popular sovereignty” principle. In Washington, he rode with the Lincolns in the inaugural parade. The California Regiment in which he served was raised by his law partner, and he was one of the early casualties of the Civil War at the battle of Ball’s Bluff, Virginia, in October, 1861. Lincoln was shocked by the death of his flamboyant friend. Baker would probably fit Donald’s “enjoyable friendship” category, although there also was the loyalty that Lincoln and his wife appreciated in someone who kept his word about the Whig Congressional seat rotation when they were getting started. Different as the three were, these individuals illustrate the varied relationships involved in contributing to the movement of an outstanding stump speaker inching his way toward the presidency.

Readers may be surprised that as Herndon’s only biographer, (Lincoln’s Herndon: A Biography, 1948), Donald inquires in the pref-

ace: “How reliable are William H. Herndon’s recollections of his friendship with Lincoln?” (xvii). They will be reassured to know that he has reexamined his notes, the Herndon-Weik Collection at the Library of Congress, and perused *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln.* This has caused him to become “much more skeptical” (232). Perhaps no person is better equipped to deal with Herndon’s exigent material. Since his 1948 Herndon biography, which reflected James G. Randall’s attitude that the Ann Rutledge love story “was largely myth,” Donald has negotiated two 180 degree reversals—the first “a mild endorsement” of the story in his 1995 *Lincoln,* and the second, his “present negative opinion” (21–23). Donald’s new work gives some implied understanding of Lincoln’s attraction to Herndon as a partner, in Herndon’s assembly and discussion of books and correspondence in the economic and abolition literature of the day, including Henry Carey, and Theodore Parker (69–70, 80), which opened many new windows for his senior partner. He provides a brief summary of Herndon’s strained relationship with Mary Lincoln and also of Lincoln’s attitudes toward Herndon’s bouts of alcoholism (90–92). Donald softens his earlier view that the Mary Lincoln-Herndon antagonism appeared prior to 1866, for which evidence is lacking. Importantly, Herndon heard a draft of the House Divided speech and encouraged Lincoln to proceed, while most of his supporters thought it was too radical. Actually, Herndon’s own radicalism on slavery and his lack of restraint, in voicing it as the election of 1860 unfolded and the secession crises mushroomed, was possibly one of the reasons Lincoln made no move to ask him to go to Washington. Donald recaps the chronology of the writing of *Herndon’s Lincoln* and leaves no doubt of Herndon’s devotion and loyalty to his mentor.

Orville Browning simply does not meet Donald’s own criteria for full or “complete” friendship, although he describes him as “his closest wartime friend” (xvii). Browning wrote in his diary shortly after Lincoln’s assassination: “Our friendship was close, warm, and I believe sincere” (139), though he was burdened by the guilt of his own inconstancy. They had met as Whigs in the Illinois legislature in 1836 and encountered one another in the two arenas they both were devoted to—law and politics—for the next three decades. They came from different backgrounds, which might have been an impediment. Browning’s family was several rungs up the socio-economic ladder, something he would have been keenly


5. Roy P. Basler et al., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln,* 9 vols. (New Bruns-
aware of in early nineteenth-century America. Did that not make a difference? “Possibly Browning was jealous of Lincoln,” Donald admits, and then passes it off as Browning’s inability to “take seriously the political aspirations of his old friend” (107). Prior to the 1860 nomination, Browning favored ex-Whig and Know-Nothing Edward Bates, but he was willing to support Lincoln before the Indiana and Pennsylvania caucuses when it was clear Bates had no momentum. Five days after the nomination, he lamented the decision, but within a month he convinced Bates to support Lincoln, and canvassed for Lincoln himself in the campaign. Following his appointment to the Senate to replace Stephen A. Douglas, he vacillated from radical to conservative, as Lincoln slowly moved toward emancipation. Browning and his wife were extremely compassionate when Willy died and Tad’s life was threatened. He coveted an appointment to the Supreme Court in 1862 as Lincoln named three others, and he was passed over for Interior Secretary about the same time. There were two more openings in the Court in 1863 and 1864, but by then he had lost Lincoln’s confidence. His most repugnant gaffe was his involvement in the Radical Republican caucus to pressure Lincoln to restructure his cabinet in December 1862. The following year he toyed with the possibility of forming a new party. The dismal Union military disappointments of 1864 caused him to further doubt his socially inferior friend. Four days after Sherman occupied Atlanta, and on the day Lincoln ordered the celebration of the victories in Atlanta and Mobile, Browning wrote to a friend: “I am personally attached to the President, and have faithfully tried to uphold him, and make him respectable; tho’ I never have been able to persuade myself that he was big enough for his position…. I fear he is a failure” (emphasis is the reviewer’s) (138). He took no part in the 1864 campaign. Donald presents practically all of the above information, although more favorably to Browning than presented here. Under the circumstances, one must ask, as a true friend, whose responsibility was it to adapt?

David Davis is downgraded to the “useful” friend category along with Lyman Trumbull, Gustave Koerner, and Ebenezer Peck (66) because he “tended to think himself infallible,” and after the misunderstandings in the Cameron appointment, “Lincoln was wary of Davis’s advice” (102). This is an inappropriate characterization. Davis was bluff and plain spoken, and perhaps at times blunt, yet Lincoln listened to his advice throughout 1864, including his strong support for the appointment of Justice Swayne as chief justice rather than Salmon Chase. One of Davis’s expressed concerns about
Chase—his unremitting pursuit of the presidency—gave Lincoln pause as well, and it came to pass in 1868 and 1872. Lincoln’s responsiveness in appointing Davis’s candidate to the federal district bench in Indianapolis shortly after choosing Chase in 1864, displays his regard for Davis’s judgment. But for Davis, Lincoln would not have written his famous consolation letter to Fanny McCullough on the battlefield death of her father, which Donald quotes on page 5. This was a small gesture compared to Davis’s organization of Lincoln’s 1860 nomination, but it displays Davis’s softer side, which Lincoln knew well from their eleven years together on the circuit. Davis could differ with Lincoln and yet remain loyal. Possibly his frank style in his interviews with Herndon gave Donald the notion that he was irascible when Lincoln did not ask for his advice or confide in him (67).

In Donald’s preface, Leonard Swett is listed among six others with “too little evidence” to support their candidacies for the pantheon of Lincoln friendship. He lacks a book-length biography, although he appears frequently in Willard King’s biography of Davis. There are at least seven published articles on him, he was a participant of record in ninety cases with Lincoln on the Eighth Circuit during their decade together, and manuscript collections on him exist in the Illinois State Historical Library and elsewhere. During more than half of the sixty months from Lincoln’s nomination to the assassination, Swett was either on a mission for Lincoln or at his side in Washington. He assisted Lincoln in his two Senate campaigns, two nominating conventions, two presidential campaigns, and cabinet selections. Lincoln asked him what position he might want, and Swett unfortunately responded turbidly. Three offers were made, none attractive to Swett. Lincoln dispatched him on three temporary missions: one to scout out cabinet appointees and the political situation regarding secession in Washington, the second to deliver orders discharging John C. Frémont from his command of the western armies, which he accomplished with imagination and assistance, and a third to claim the New Almaden quicksilver mine in California for the government. The last could have been embarrassing for Lincoln had it not been for Lincoln’s political acumen. Swett does not come out ethically clean in the last instance because he arranged a financial interest for himself in the process, which was a highly convoluted affair also involving Attorney General Bates and Interior Secretary John Palmer Usher. Some of Swett’s letter to Herndon of January 17, 1866, discussing personal and friendship characteristics of Lincoln and other
reminiscences, are often quoted by Lincoln biographers, including Donald. Any complete treatment of Lincoln friends must reckon with and evaluate the Leonard Swett connection.

In his afterword, David Donald raises three intriguing questions about the difference close friends might have made had Lincoln relied on them in crucial decisions in his presidency. The last one dealt with the “terrible choice” of Andrew Johnson as his vice-president in 1864 (218). Not much is known about how the selection was made at the Baltimore nominating convention of June 1864. Either Lincoln left the choice entirely to the delegates or he insisted on a war Democrat from the South. We simply do not know. The choices going into the convention were to re-nominate Hannibal Hamblin from Maine, who was compatible but more radical than Lincoln, or a war Democrat such as Johnson, Benjamin Butler, or Daniel S. Dickenson, a former New York senator. Johnson’s background was very public since he had been a Tennessee legislator, a representative in Congress for ten years (including the term Lincoln was there), governor of Tennessee, U.S. senator, and military governor of the state. Apparently nobody bothered to check him out—neither Seward nor his political advisor Thurlow Weed, nor Stanton or Henry Raymond, New York Times editor and chairman of the Republican National Committee. Lincoln also had lived through the Whig policy miscarriages of two vice-presidential successions, John Tyler (1841–1845) and Millard Fillmore (1850–1853). Did anyone remind him of those?

Actually, there was another candidate. David Davis and Swett had determined to present the name of Joseph Holt, Judge Advocate General, whom Lincoln knew well, a Kentucky War Democrat. When delegate Swett presented his name, Nicolay was questioned about it by the head of the Illinois delegation, wanting to know if “Swett was all right,” that is, loyal to Lincoln. Nicolay wrote Hay in Washington forwarding the question, asking whether Swett’s “urging Holt for V.P. . . . reflects the President’s wishes?” Hay passed it on to Lincoln who endorsed the letter, “Swett is unquestionably all right. Mr. Holt is a good man, but I had not heard or thought of him for V.P.” Hay responded, adding “He has never even mentioned Col. Holt’s name to the Prest. for the place. . . . Do not infer . . . that the President objects to Swett presenting Col. Holt’s name.” Swett then dropped advocating Holt, and backed Johnson. The point is,
if Lincoln’s memory was correct, neither Davis nor Swett had felt comfortable discussing Holt with him, and why—despite Swett having been in Washington almost continuously for the seven months before the convention?

Seward started his relationship with Lincoln smarting from his loss to him in the 1860 Republican Convention and with a superior attitude illustrated by his April 1, 1861, memoranda to Lincoln suggesting a premiere’s position for himself. Donald characterizes this as a rebellious streak in his nature accompanying a general submission to authority figures—his father, his father-in-law/law partner, and his political manager, Thurlow Weed. Without benefit of modern psychology, Donald indicates how Lincoln came to understand this and assume the leadership role with Seward in a step-by-step process over the next two years to the point that Seward became fully supportive and loyal, even when he disagreed with Lincoln, as he did on emancipation. By letting Seward argue before the cabinet for the release of the Confederate envoys, Mason and Slidell, after their capture from the British packet Trent, Lincoln got him to adopt his own position. Mary Lincoln, Chase, Welles, Edward Bates, and Montgomery Blair did not like Seward, but Lincoln seemed to thrive on this “cognitive dissonance” as Donald relates it (155, 159). The relationship with Seward was positively solidified in the cabinet crisis with the Radical Republican senators in December, 1862, when Lincoln defended Seward (and himself) by calling Chase’s hand. The friendship—never more than enjoyable—improved the following year to the point that Seward was writing of the president as “the best and wisest man he has ever known” (156).

Stanton, in Donald’s judgment, was “too independent and prickly to be a close friend” of Lincoln, to which he adds a tendency to veto the president (214). Not entirely. Mark Neely notes that “Lincoln worked more closely with Stanton than with any other member of the Cabinet” and that “Stanton’s differences with Lincoln have been exaggerated.” Unfortunately, Donald’s appraisal of Stanton in this context deprives us of his keen observation in sorting out Lincoln’s relationship to this admittedly perplexing and tendentious man.

Donald details the warm, mentoring relationship that evolved between Lincoln and his two personal secretaries, twenty-nine-year-old John Nicolay and twenty-three-year-old John Hay. Nicolay
had known and worked for Lincoln earlier, and Hay was his childhood friend in nearby Pittsfield before they moved to Springfield. Their backgrounds and personalities were contrasting. Nicolay, who immigrated from Bavaria as a child, was self-educated and learned printing and publishing, whereas Hay was educated at Brown University and was reading law with his uncle, Milton Hay. Nicolay displayed a dour tendency, while Hay was easy-going. Since Mary Lincoln more readily accepted Hay socially, it fell to him to smooth relations with her as “the Hell-Cat,” which they dubbed her, as her life became more difficult after Willy’s death. Nicolay initially admired Lincoln from his earlier contacts; the cavalier Hay required a year or two to reveal a full devotion to Lincoln’s superior abilities and magnanimity. Although Lincoln treated them as equals, the work was demanding, their hours were long, and people were often unrelenting. “The Tycoon,” as they settled on calling him, understood their pressures and sought to relieve them by sending them away on special assignments, or by relaxing with them in literature or the theater. He found Nicolay capable of helping with political responsibilities and sent him to New York to assess the customs house manipulation by Chase, to Baltimore to represent him at the convention, and to Missouri to sort out Republican in-fighting. He was completely open with them on political and administrative matters, and they discreetly kept his confidences. As the end of the first term approached, he was concerned with moving their careers along by finding assignments for them in the Paris legation.

Donald has opened the way for a fuller examination of Lincoln through his relationships with people who were his friends. He is right in saying that there were scores of people claiming friendship, and the problem is to winnow them down in some meaningful fashion to gain a better understanding of Lincoln’s uniqueness. At least he will help many of us to scrutinize our own thoughts about Lincoln’s friends. There is more work to be done on this particular subject. The reviews of psychology, psychiatry, and philosophy are useful. Possibly Donald locks himself too tightly in an Aristotelian triangle, which limits his interpretations. It probably is not wise to refine the search to so few. Donald’s argument for the chosen six: “Each saw a different side of Lincoln, and taken together, their accounts present a rounded picture of Lincoln at various stages of his development” (xvi), does not fly well enough. Some of the
cranky or disgruntled types also are friends (Davis, Stanton), even if they deny it by their words and occasional actions. Some must be included to gain a fuller developmental picture (Stuart, Logan). Twice as many would help to achieve a more “rounded picture.” This is not to say that Donald has done anything other than a superb job of articulation and writing. Anyone with a serious interest in Lincoln will be well rewarded by reading his new book.