Review Essay

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In this provocative volume, Paul D. Escott takes dead aim at the “inspiring myths and idealistic themes of progress” that “dominate popular reflections” on Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War era (xiv). It is a book that makes important contributions, but they will likely be overshadowed by its overstated arguments and heavy-handed tone.

The book’s structure highlights some of its merits. Rather than pursuing Lincoln in a vacuum, Escott is concerned with the racial attitudes that surrounded him. And he makes an excellent point by confining most of his discussion to white attitudes about what to do with blacks, highlighting that the way Lincoln’s generation posed the book’s title question was “deeply flawed . . . , reflecting in its language the assumptions that African Americans were objects, . . . and that white people were entitled to decide their future” (xviii). Further, rather than following most scholars in attending only to the Union or to the Confederacy, Escott offers a valuable synthesis of their scholarship that illuminates how the war forced serious reconsiderations of majority stances in the warring sections. Escott shows that the war gave reformers—whether of the antislavery variety in the North or those who sought a sanctified slavery in the South—an opportunity to effect changes they had long sought in vain. Following two sections devoted separately to the Union and the Confederacy, Escott brings them into conversation in “Confluence,” which deals with the place of slavery and race at the Hampton Roads Conference of 1865 and with the hard work of reconstructing the Union.

Escott promises to stay focused primarily on race rather than slavery, or in other words “to illuminate attitudes and policies affecting the future status of the freed people rather than to focus on the decision to emancipate” (xv). This is a curious choice given how intertwined those two questions were in the Civil War era, but the reader does not have to wait long to understand why he made this choice. He
candidly admits that this was part of his “effort to tell a more realistic and less celebratory story” than the standard one about Lincoln and emancipation (xv). Thus all his (repeated, ad nauseum) pledges to give “an undistorted, accurate analysis” (xv, passim) obscure the significance of his choice of topic, which is as agenda-driven as the work of historians who celebrate Lincoln and emancipation.

Escott aims to shatter the modern legend in a variety of places. At the most general level, he seeks to destroy two old and persistent myths: the Southern one that state rights rather than slavery constituted the Confederate cause, and the Northern one that Yankees fought primarily to secure emancipation and racial equality. Both myths “oversimplified” the real history, he writes in a typically angry passage, “and both contributed to a celebratory narrative, deeply rooted in the popular culture, that has distorted the truth, minimized the shortcomings of both sides, and exaggerated the progress and advances that came out of the war” (1). “When the fighting began,” he posits, “both sides agreed on the preservation of slavery” (2). Later, he writes of the North’s “universal conviction that slavery in the states was not to be disturbed” (30). This subargument typifies the larger book in that Escott replaces one overgeneralization and exaggeration with his own. He neglects not only Northern abolitionists white and black, but also a wide variety of Republicans who sought either the immediate or gradual extirpation of slavery. His discussion of this point further caricatures the Republican Party by attributing to all its members the desire “to exclude African Americans”—not just slavery—“from the territories” (16). Such overgeneralizations feed into statements that flirt with moral equivalence between the North and the South (see, for example, 170).

Neither does Escott spare Lincoln himself from his hammer blows. The Lincoln that one encounters in these pages is far from the principled Emancipator of legend; typically for this book, he is almost the opposite of that legend. Escott’s Lincoln is a shifty politician first and foremost, who sought to leave all his options open rather than committing to one course of action on either slavery or race. The one “enduring hallmark of his policies” was not a commitment to black freedom, but rather a willingness “to go very far indeed . . . to regain the understanding and cooperation of white Southerners” (20). Once again Escott has good evidence with which he could have revised the common wisdom, but instead he overreaches by seeking to completely overturn it. In one particularly revealing passage, he demonstrates from Lincoln’s family life that “the plight of Southern whites was not abstract to Lincoln” (33). This insight helps us understand Lincoln’s continuing struggle between competing priorities.
But Escott’s Lincoln is consistently conciliatory to slaveholders, ever willing to achieve reunion with them at the expense of black freedom. By contrast, “Lincoln chose not to take political risks to improve the future status of black people” (95). “Restrictions on freedom for the slaves and concessions to slaveholders” were not merely elements of Lincoln’s reunion tool kit so much as they were constants, “integral to his thinking” (100). Escott rests his case with the startling charge that in the final analysis, when Jefferson Davis proposed “emancipation,” he “took political risks that were greater than any Abraham Lincoln had run” (xviii).

In this running indictment of Lincoln, Escott advances evidence selectively and often fails to discover to the defense evidence that might acquit its client. For instance, he presents Lincoln as eager to placate slaveholders and, even in the pivotal year of 1864, willing to backtrack on emancipation, both in negotiations with Confederate leaders and in his reelection bid. Escott therefore stresses Lincoln’s struggle with Radical Republicans in Congress who opposed his lenient reconstruction plan for seceded states. And “to survive politically,” says Escott, Lincoln “trimmed and modified his position on” how negotiable emancipation would be in Southern states returning to the Union (119). This was an odd choice of election issues on which to focus, given Escott’s stated focus on race rather than on slavery. Why not, for instance, focus on the issue of African-American prisoners of war and Lincoln’s suspension of prisoner exchanges until the Confederacy treated black Union soldiers the same as white troops? That would seem to be more relevant to issues of race than the issues on which Escott chose to center his discussion. But Lincoln’s stance on the prisoner-of-war issue sustains the picture of a principled politician in an election year. Escott also ignores evidence that would contradict his portrait of Lincoln as a conciliator. In 1864 and 1865 Lincoln’s generals, including Grant, waged relentless war against the Confederacy. Escott ascribes this approach to Grant alone, without a hint that Lincoln and Grant shared the same strategic vision (128–29).

Furthermore, in his discussion of Lincoln’s stances on slavery in negotiations with Confederates late in the war, Escott briefly admits but immediately downplays Lincoln’s knowledge that Davis’s representatives would never accept any terms for reunion and that both sides were maneuvering to try to make the other look unreasonable (see especially 129–31). Escott does make a persuasive case that in these negotiations (if that is even the word for them), Lincoln held out the possibility that emancipation might end with only those slaves already freed rather than extending throughout the Confederacy. As
prosecutor, however, he dismisses this as just another case in which Lincoln—who was simultaneously pushing for complete emancipation via the Thirteenth Amendment—was “politically slippery” on abolition (137). The defense—and perhaps jury members—might read this in a less sinister light as Lincoln prescribing the boundaries (honoring the freedom of those already liberated at a minimum, complete abolition as a maximum) between which he would consider peace.

Pursuing the shock value of elevating Davis above Lincoln also encourages some exaggerations in Escott’s treatment of the Confederate debate over arming troops. He rightly portrays this as a bitter debate about priorities—win the war by any means, or hold onto our proslavery ideals by refusing to arm slaves and offer them freedom as if it were truly a reward?—waged late in the game and only under extraordinary pressure. But in his zeal for Davis the Emancipator, he overstates the immediate impact of the measure, which the Confederate Congress enacted in 1865. He paints with the broadest of brushes when he states that this was a “policy of arming and emancipating the slaves” (xvii). In reality, the law itself only spoke of arming regiments—whose numbers everyone knew would fall well short of the millions of slaves in the Confederacy!—not of freeing them or their families. True, Davis’s executive branch smuggled an offer of freedom into the recruitment process, but doing that for a few hundred recruits who never saw action is a very far cry from “emancipating the slaves.”

In short, most readers will need much better evidence than all this to be convinced that Lincoln was a timid and pro-southern president outdone on slavery and race by a fearless and principled Davis (who was, after all, a lame duck).

The reader who wishes scholars could reach a popular audience with more nuanced views of both sides’ views on race and slavery, will rue the lost opportunity. Escott compiles important evidence in support of important points for students of the era to understand. But his endless pledges to offer simply “an accurate approach to the historical record” leading to “an honest, realistic understanding of history” (245) end up with the same feel—from the opposite end of the political spectrum, to be sure—as Fox News’s pledges to deliver “fair and balanced” news coverage.