

Review Essay

*Will the Real Mr. Lincoln Please Stand Up?*¹

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David S. Reynolds. *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times*. New York: Penguin Press, 2020. Pp. 1,066.

Richard Striner. *Summoned to Glory: The Audacious Life of Abraham Lincoln*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020. Pp. 533.

In 1909, the Russian author Leo Tolstoy speculated that “We are still too near to [Abraham Lincoln’s] greatness, and so can hardly appreciate his divine power; but after a few centuries more our posterity will find him considerably bigger than we do. His genius is still too strong and too powerful for the common understanding, just as the sun is too hot when its light beams directly on us.”²

But that warning certainly did not dissuade people from trying. For biographers, Lincoln is the gift that apparently keeps on giving, with no end in sight. The quest to find the “real” Lincoln has transcended centuries, not to mention generations. Indeed, we keep reinventing Lincoln to create a version of him that is true to his time and ours.

I would be much pleased to see some heroic, shrewd, fully-informed, healthy bodied, middle-aged, beard-faced American blacksmith or boatman come down from the West across the Alleghenies, and walk into the presidency [wrote Walt Whitman in the 1850s], dressed in a clean suit of working attire, and with the tan all over his face, breast, and arms; I would certainly vote for that sort of man possessing the due requirements, before any other candidate. Such is the thought that must become familiar

1. My title comes, with respect and fond memories, from the panel television show “To Tell The Truth” which was hosted by Bud Collyer and ran on CBS from 1956–1968 before going into syndication.

2. This was first published in the *New York World*, February 7, 1909.

to you, whoever you are, and to the people of These States; and must eventually take shape in action.³

Whitman somehow managed to capture the essence of the Lincoln identity before he or virtually anyone else had heard very much about Lincoln at all.

Sound familiar? But was that the *real* Lincoln? Lincoln has been described as everything from a calculating, aggressive nationalist, an American Bismarck, if you will, by, among others, Edmund Wilson,⁴ to the filiopietistic version appearing in Carl Sandburg's six-volume biography of 1926–39. Depending upon the era, biographers praised Lincoln's wisdom in assembling a Cabinet of political rivals or the beauty of his language. Lincoln has inspired quite formidable biographies that range from the 10-volume study of 1890 by his personal secretaries, John Hay and John Nicolay, to the two-volume, 3,580-page "green monster" (2008), as Michael Burlingame refers to his magisterial work.

Lincoln, of course, would be amused and humbled by these massive studies because when he was pressed by author, attorney, and journalist John Locke Scripps for information for his 1860 campaign biography, the reticent Lincoln replied, "Why Scripps . . . it is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of my early life. It can be condensed into a single sentence, and that sentence you will find in *Gray's Elegy*,⁵ 'The short and simple annals of the poor.' That's my life and that's all you or any one [sic] else can make of it." Lincoln did eventually relent, and the result produced by Scripps was 32 pages, a grand length, according to Lincoln.

In recent years, however, Lincoln has been under attack, not for being too nationalistic, or militaristic; no, rather, for being not militant enough, or egalitarian enough, or for paling in his commitment to racial justice when compared with the Radical Republicans in Congress. It is clear, then, that new studies of him are always welcome,

3. "The Eighteenth Presidency," in Justin Kaplan, ed., *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1996), p. 1,332.

4. See his "Abraham Lincoln: The Union as Religious Mysticism," *The New Yorker*, March 14, 1953, p. 116.

5. John L. Scripps to William H. Herndon, June 24, 1865, in Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements About Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), pp. 57–58. Thomas Gray, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* completed in 1750 and first published in 1751. The poem's origins are unknown, but it was partly inspired by Gray's thoughts following the death of the poet Richard West in 1742.

especially if a reader is continually to measure him against his times *and* ours, which isn't always especially fair and useful. But it *is* fair to say that the two books under review, in their own inimitable ways, add to the storied pantheon of Lincoln literature.

David Reynolds's Lincoln is very much an Honest Abe. While the title of his book is *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times*, Reynolds produces an updated Abe, fully woke and appropriately radical. Reynolds, the author of previous biographies of Walt Whitman and John Brown, among numerous other studies in that era, sheds much light on the usually overlooked Wide Awakes. These were groups of young Lincoln "b'hoys" whose determination and aggression would rival, if not surpass, the supporters of the 2020 presidential candidates. Reynolds describes Lincoln as a tightrope walker, which is not a new interpretation, but even so, as Reynolds's Lincoln walks that tightrope, perhaps occasionally listing left and right, he never wavers from a progressive direction, which would put him very much in line with our times.

More of a character study than a conventional biography, Reynolds's book explores Lincoln's complexities and nuances. His tastes, likes, dislikes, the quality of this thinking, and the evolution of his ideas, according to Reynolds, were all shaped and molded by the culture and society around him. Lincoln "had experienced culture in all its dimensions," writes Reynolds, "from high to low, sacred to profane, conservative to radical, sentimental to subversive." Reynolds would seem to accept Lincoln's reply to Scripps that making anything out of his early life would be a "great piece of folly."

Lincoln was well aware that his lineage descended from New England on his father's side and Virginia on his mother's side. That heritage would not play well in the era in which Lincoln became active politically, so he "pruned his family tree, emphasizing facts that made him attractive to a broad spectrum of voters." Reynolds asserts that Lincoln drew on both traditions: a love of freedom from his father's side, and commitment to honor from his mother's. By so doing, Lincoln transcended the cultural divide. "He was," Reynolds writes, "a Southern-born man, raised in what was then the West, who came to adopt Northern attitudes."

Not only did Lincoln minimize his sectional origins, but he camouflaged his religious roots. He claimed Quaker ancestors in all likelihood because of that denomination's opposition to slavery. "I am naturally anti-slavery," Lincoln declared in 1864. "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think

and feel.”⁶ Lincoln might indeed have always been antislavery, but he was not always an abolitionist, as Reynolds rightly points out. Because Lincoln was so significantly affected by the cultural changes that occurred around him, he, like many others, was influenced by what Reynolds calls “an Antislavery Renaissance” in the late 1840s and early 1850s, which had profound political consequences. In response, publications proliferated that railed against “Negro rule” and racial amalgamation. Lincoln was caricatured as Abraham Africanus I, and Democrats coined the word “miscegenation” and tried to tie it to Lincoln in the presidential election of 1864.

Lincoln, of course, was reelected, an outcome that Reynolds ascribes not only to military victory but to cultural factors as well. Reiterating a cartoon from a Frank Leslie’s comic weekly in which Lincoln is allegedly quoted, Reynolds compares Lincoln to Charles Blondin, the French tightrope walker who electrified Americans by crossing Niagara Falls with his manager on his back. The caption reads:

Mr. Lincoln said recently that he was like Blondin on the tightrope, with all that was valuable in America, the Union, in a barrow. Some of the spectators cried, ‘A little faster, Mr. Lincoln.’ Another said, ‘A little slower, Mr. Lincoln.’ A third said, ‘Straighten your back a little more.’ Others shouted, ‘Stoop a little lower.’ Others cried, ‘A little more to the South.’ Some, ‘A little more North.’ ‘What would be thought [said Lincoln,] ‘if, when Blondin was in the performance of his dangerous task, the spectators bothered him with advice, and even went so far as to shake the rope? So with me—keep quiet, and I’ll wheel my barrow across.’⁷

6. Letter to Albert G. Hodges, April 4, 1864. This letter was a summary of a conversation that Lincoln had with three Kentuckians: Governor Thomas E. Bramlette, Albert Hodges, and Archibald Dixon. Hodges was the editor of the *Frankfort Commonwealth*, and Dixon had served in the U.S. Senate from 1852 to 1855. Bramlette had protested the recruiting of black regiments in Kentucky.

7. *Frank Leslie’s Budget of Fun*, September 1, 1864, pp. 8–9. Lincoln is depicted as acrobat Charles Blondin, who was famous for his daring tightrope-walks across Niagara Falls. Blondin first did this on June 30, 1859, and a number of times thereafter, often with different theatrical variations: blindfolded, in a sack, trundling a wheelbarrow, on stilts, carrying his manager Harry Colcord on his back, sitting down midway while he cooked and ate an omelet, or standing on a chair with only one of its legs balanced on the rope. Lincoln combines two of Blondin’s feats: pushing a wheelbarrow and carrying another man on his back. In this case, it is two men: Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles on Lincoln’s shoulders and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton on Welles’s shoulders. Salmon Chase, who had resigned as Treasury secretary in June, tumbles off the back of Stanton.

Reynolds's cultural comparisons become more compelling as Lincoln's public persona becomes more pronounced. On the day that Lincoln delivered his speech at Cooper Union, the speech that he later said made him president, he spent the day across the street from P. T. Barnum's Museum. Reynolds maintains that Lincoln played up the comedy of his own appearance in a very Barnum-like way, "his tall angular body posed against his wife's petite one." Lincoln's "cragged face, with its cavernous eyes, large mouth and nose, and swarthy complexion; his wide ears and unruly black hair; his huge hands and feet and overly long arms and legs—these features, along with ill-fitting clothes and awkward gait, made him seem almost as unusual as a Barnum exhibit." Lincoln saw, according to Reynolds, that it cost him nothing to be "an American spectacle" in a climate of American sensationalism. Lincoln even hosted a reception at the White House for Barnum's Tom Thumb and his wife.

Therein lies one of the greatest virtues of this cultural biography. Reynolds makes some truly interesting links between Lincoln and other major cultural figures of the day. For instance, Reynolds explores an even closer relationship between Lincoln and the acerbic, vehemently anti-Copperhead humorist David Ross Locke, who wrote under the pseudonym Petroleum V. Nasby. Lincoln read Nasby aloud to his Cabinet and friends, and after the war George S. Boutwell, secretary of state under President Grant, declared in a speech at Cooper Union that "the crushing of the Rebellion could be credited to three forces: the Army, the Navy, and the Nasby letters." Lincoln, according to one of his contemporaries, was reported to have said, "I am going to write to 'Petroleum' to come down here, and I intend to tell him if he will communicate his talent to me, I will swap places with him."⁸

Reynolds maintains that Lincoln used Nasby as a surrogate for his own views. It is not surprising then that Lincoln is portrayed as someone who posed as a moderate and packaged "progressive themes in conservative stylistic containers." The bottom line for Reynolds is that Lincoln was a "radically progressive self" who held "an underlying radicalism on race." While Reynolds acknowledges that Lincoln made some "reprehensible" comments early in his career about black suffrage, he dismisses Lincoln's racist remarks as being made "reluctantly."

8. Boutwell's quotation first appeared in the *Jackson (Michigan) Citizen*, February 21, 1888; Colonel Alexander K. McClure, *"Abe" Lincoln's Yarns and Stories* (Philadelphia: Henry Neil, 1901), p. 198.

That Lincoln was the consummate politician should be a surprise to no one who has ever studied him. He was aware of what he was doing when he was doing it. Reynolds sees Lincoln becoming radicalized over time. While Lincoln sought unity and cherished democracy, he slowly and steadily saw that by 1863 he must emancipate the enslaved in the South, authorize the enlistment of black men as soldiers, and publicly endorse suffrage for them. Such were decisions that Lincoln made only after considerable thought and reflection.

The subtitle of Richard Striner's biography says it all: "The Audacious Life of Abraham Lincoln." Striner, the author of several excellent volumes on Lincoln and race and Lincoln and slavery, takes direct aim at all the biographies of Lincoln that see him as displaying "essential passivity" or "reluctance to take the initiative and make bold plans." For Striner, Lincoln is a man who "will stand for all time as an exemplar of human life fulfilled. . . . [a] man who redeemed the American promise, made real as no other man has."

Of the two books under review, Striner's would be closer to a conventional biography, covering Lincoln's life chronologically and devoting a good deal of attention to the president's public life while covering quickly the topics that have preoccupied other biographers. Striner agrees with those who believe that Lincoln loved Ann Rutledge and was devastated by her death. Too, he acknowledges the speculation surrounding Lincoln's sexuality while dismissing the idea that he was homosexual.

When considering Lincoln's marriage and domestic life, Striner offers no definitive answer as to the nature of his relationship with Mary, though his disparagement of her as one who "fancied herself a kind of power behind the throne," and who "used emotional blackmail to get her way," is right in line with the most recent study of the Lincoln marriage, Michael Burlingame's *An American Marriage: The Untold Story of Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd* (2021). Yet Striner's opinion that history may never have heard of Abraham Lincoln had he married Ann Rutledge would seem to suggest that Mary played a major role in her husband's success and that her ambition in their marriage propelled her husband forward.

Striner venerates Lincoln's "capacity for manipulation, his power to command while projecting sweet innocence." He takes issue with the "wrong-headed" stereotype of Lincoln as a "slow-moving moderate who somehow achieved greatness." Lincoln found his "life work," Striner contends, during the Kansas-Nebraska crisis of the 1850s. He credits Lincoln with launching a "direct attack upon the racism of Stephen Douglas" in his famous Peoria speech criticizing the Little

Giant's idea of popular sovereignty. At the core of *Summoned to Glory* are Lincoln's attitudes toward race and slavery. Continuing where he left off in his *Father Abraham: Lincoln's Relentless Struggle to End Slavery* (2006), Striner maintains that not until Lincoln was in his forties did his attitudes on slavery and race crystalize.

Striner quotes Lincoln on the Declaration of Independence signers who "did not intend to declare all men equal *in all respects* . . . [but rather] to "declare the right to equality so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit." Equality was a goal that "even though never perfectly attained," Striner says, it was "constantly approximated." On the eve of the Civil War, Lincoln would say, "All I ask for the Negro is that if you do not like him, let him alone."

Lincoln, Striner believes, was a "holistic" thinker possessing great strategic abilities hidden behind humor and self-deprecation. "The reputation of 'Honest Abe,'" he writes "would blind so many to the depth of his shrewdness and cunning." It was Lincoln's intent, according to Striner, that from the beginning he would "put slavery on a path to ultimate extinction." This interpretation concurs with, among others, James Oakes's in his recent *The Crooked Path to Abolition: Abraham Lincoln and the Antislavery Constitution* (2021).

Lincoln would save the Union his way, and by 1863 he had made ending slavery the central Federal war aim. His Unionism, Striner writes, "must be seen in the context of what the Union *would stand for* . . . Final victory depended on the presence of a mind . . . that could *visualize* power and direct it. Lincoln possessed that sort of mind." John Wilkes Booth's bullet stole "an extraordinary future . . . from America."

Perhaps Striner's most controversial theme (albeit a speculative one) is his challenge to the conventional interpretation of Reconstruction had Lincoln lived. Almost everything that Lincoln did in the spring of 1865, according to Striner, reveals that he was building a dynamic partnership with the Radical Republicans that might well have given America its great Civil Rights revolution a hundred years earlier.⁹ This, of course, is highly debatable, and, while interesting to engage in

9. On this topic, readers will want to consult Kate Masur, *Until Justice is Done: First Civil Rights Movement, from the Revolution to Reconstruction* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830–1910* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016); Heather Cox Richardson, *To Make Men Free: A History of the Republican Party* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); and Van Gosse, *The First Reconstruction: Black Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

“what if” history, Lincoln’s relationship with the Radical Republicans while he was alive was always a tenuous one. Nevertheless, Striner is confident that “Lincoln’s mental gifts—his creativity, his flexibility, his adroitness and boldness as a strategist—would have guided and supported the Radical Republicans as they worked to transform America.”

To support his interpretation, Striner uses Lincoln’s handling of the carving out of the new state of West Virginia from the existing state of Virginia during the war, a thorny issue that “may well have baffled lesser minds.” That Lincoln found a way to solve this problem with “breathtaking ease” convinced Striner that Lincoln could have used this as a new precedent which would have been useful for the Radical Republicans after the war.

Of the two books under review, *Summoned to Glory* is more traditional in approach. Striner’s Lincoln is audacious, while Reynolds’s is cautious. Although both books adopt a basically chronological approach and delve deeply into Lincoln’s life, Reynolds’s *Abe* is both something more and something less than a biography, as readers may learn less about the political intrigue or the personal dramas of Lincoln’s life. Striner does a good job in those areas to be sure. Reynolds laces each chapter with frequent references to Lincoln’s contemporaries in literature, music, theater, and popular culture of the day, and especially valuable is Reynolds’s demonstration of the manner in which these people shaped Lincoln both personally and politically.

For Striner, Lincoln is a man virtually ahead of his times. For Reynolds, Lincoln was a man in, but not necessarily of, his time. Reynolds believes Lincoln was by nature “a fatalist, but not a pessimistic one,” someone prepared to take a “middling course.” Whereas Striner extols Lincoln’s antislavery views and activities, Reynolds emphasizes the ways in which Lincoln cloaked his hatred of slavery with public moderation. Although there are almost 1,600 pages between the two books, reading both in tandem is the best way to get a modern version of the man who, only with help, could muster but 32 pages of his own autobiography.