

Review

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Fred Lee Hord and Matthew D. Norman, editors. *Knowing Him by Heart: African Americans on Abraham Lincoln*. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: The Knox College Lincoln Studies Center and the University of Illinois Press, 2023. Pp. 537.

In her book *Achievement* the philosopher Gwen Bradford argued that the “essential features” of achievements are, “other things being equal, the more difficult the better, the more competently caused the better, and the more unity in diversity the better. . . . the value of achievements can also be augmented or diminished by the value of their process or product.”¹ Reflecting upon her concise definition provides a philosophical method for understanding *why* Abraham Lincoln’s presidency can be considered a success: He was a key reason the Union was preserved and representative democracy vindicated (difficult), slavery was ended (competently caused), with Lincoln using his “will and rationality”² (unity in diversity), all in the service of the expansion of human liberty (augmented value). Ever since Lincoln’s assassination in 1865, if not years before that, millions of Americans, especially African Americans, have lauded the 16th president’s successes, although not without significant dissent.

Before now, however, we have never had a single anthology of primary sources detailing how African Americans have viewed Lincoln since the 1850s—the volume under consideration here concludes with a speech by President Barack Obama to the Abraham Lincoln Association in 2009—but due to the achievement of this work (more on that later), this is thankfully no longer true. The book *Knowing Him by Heart: African Americans on Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Fred Hord and Matthew Norman and part of the Knox College Lincoln Studies Center Series, is an outstanding volume that will benefit not only scholars but any American who takes the time to dip into these rich and varied documents. These professors spent more than a decade

1. Gwen Bradford, *Achievement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 170.

2. *Ibid.*, 124.

researching and compiling hundreds of primary sources to include in this splendid volume, and their work is an unqualified success.

What exactly does *Knowing Him by Heart* offer? What are the editors hoping to achieve? "In his seminal book, *Lincoln and the Negro*," they write in their introduction,

Benjamin Quarles suggested that 'Lincoln became Lincoln because of the Negro,' and he quoted a revealing statement from Frederick Douglass regarding the primacy of Lincoln's place in the consciousness of African Americans that serves as a central theme of this anthology: 'We all know Lincoln by heart.' The documents in this collection enable readers to . . . interrogate Quarles's conclusion, and Douglass's statement, as these sources provide an opportunity to view the scaffolding of a monument to Lincoln that has been constructed from words rather than marble or bronze. (1-2)

Hence, *Knowing Him by Heart* "offers readers an opportunity to contemplate a new type of monument that further attests to Lincoln's significance on the landscape of American memory. . . . This work," they propose, "provides substantial, substantive evidence of how these processes occurred over the span of 150 years." (3)

In addition to their efforts to construct a new, in a sense an historical monument, or scaffolding, of words about Lincoln, the editors argue that it is important to note that

the primary sources excavated and collected in this volume indicate that it would be inaccurate to conclude that African American views on Lincoln in the Emancipation Proclamation followed a straight-line trajectory that went from uncritical adulation in the 1860s to a bitter, just bitter disillusionment by the 1960s. Rather, the documents support a very different conclusion than has often been assumed and instead offer a much more complicated and nuanced set of African-American views of Lincoln. (9)

By so doing, they seek new "possibilities for signaling better race relations, or at least enabling a sober, sober reappraisal of them. Our hope is that this anthology of African-American perceptions of Lincoln will help contribute to and perhaps invigorate an informed dialog that furthers greater understanding of both past and present race relations in this country." (12)

Do the authors succeed, and if so, in what sense is their book an achievement? First, *Knowing Him by Heart* is a beautiful volume, wonderfully edited, with excellent and succinct introductions to each

African American source or reading, one that gives you a splendid summary of who the writer was and what they thought about Lincoln. In addition, there is an excellent index that will be of use to readers, where anyone who wants to dip into the sources can do so at their leisure, as this is a book to read slowly, then ponder and reflect, not one necessarily to read straight through cover to cover. Academically, perhaps by way of contrast, it can be used most profitably in an upper-division or graduate course on Lincoln, the Civil War and Reconstruction, African American History, or one on Memory and History. Given the substantial number of documents contained in the book analyzing Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, *Knowing Him by Heart* will serve as a reminder for all historians to ensure that they have their students—certainly at the K-12 and undergraduate levels—closely read and discuss the “central act” of the 16th president's administration and the varied responses collected in this work.

A second successful aspect of their volume is the inclusion within its covers of a wide variety of sources, both chronologically and geographically. Hence, we read the various thoughts of Frederick Douglass and other African American contemporaries of Lincoln (as well as his successors, obviously), but we also encounter people living as far away from Washington, D.C., in San Francisco, to cite just one example, predicting Lincoln's future apotheosis. At one Emancipation celebration there, Jeremiah Sanderson, who according to the editors “had known [William Lloyd] Garrison and worked with him,” (84) compared Lincoln to “St. Peter” and claimed that “The event which we celebrate to-day will forever embalm the name of Abraham Lincoln in the hearts of the descendants of Africa on this continent and throughout the world.” (86) Later readings from Malcolm X, Lerone Bennett, Jr., and Barbara Fields, of course, demonstrate the falsification of Sanderson's expectation, yet fulfill the editors' hopes of contributing to an informed dialogue about race in the United States.

Third, *Knowing Him by Heart* emphasizes, certainly to the extent that the sources allow, several female voices, which, like others in this volume, reflected some ambiguity regarding Lincoln. Hord and Norman note that

almost all women's voices before the modern freedom movement were either ignored or barely accorded recognition. From the inception of this project, the editors have made a concerted effort to include the voices of women by searching lesser-known publications in fairly recent, less sexist sources to ameliorate this problem, but it is a formidable one. (10)

Consequently, readers have at their fingertips sources from well-known figures such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. She wrote in 1862 that Lincoln's "dabbling with colonization just now suggests to my mind the idea of a man almost dying with a loathsome cancer, and busying himself about having his hair trimmed according to the latest fashion," (57)—although she penned a poem praising the Emancipation Proclamation a year later. Likewise included, naturally, are opinions about Lincoln from Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Readers also hear from those little known, such as Hannah Johnson, who had a son in the 54th Massachusetts Regiment and told the president in 1863 that because of his Emancipation Proclamation, "When you are dead and in Heaven, in a thousand years that action of yours will make the angels sing your praises I know it." (99) A little over 80 years later, in 1947, Ella Baker, accurately characterized by the editors as "a leading figure in the civil rights movement," (419) maintained that "the freedom of the Negroes came as an incidental matter during the Civil War, that their emancipation was an inevitable act of President Abraham Lincoln, . . . and that had it not been for the participation of Negroes in the Union Army activities emancipation probably would have been delayed." (420) Hence, she presciently told her Atlanta audience at the beginning of the Cold War and on the cusp of the civil rights movement, that America "cannot have democracy at home unless they give it to all" and "The Negro must quit looking for a savior and work to save himself and wake up others about him." (421) Such readings widen the scope of our understanding of African American responses to Lincoln over time, and deepen, or enrich, any sympathetic reader's comprehension of the complexities of the history of race relations in the United States.

In offering a final assessment, we should remind ourselves of Gwen Bradford's view that the "essential features" of achievements involve difficulty, competent causation of a valuable product (or process), combined with the unity and diversity of the use of one's will and rationality. In overcoming the difficulties they must have faced over the years in compiling these varied sources, in competently causing this book to be published, and in the process augmenting its value with their superb editing, the editors made *Knowing Him by Heart* itself an outstanding and lasting achievement, one that enables Americans, as the economist Thomas Sowell put it, "to understand the momentum of the past and the choices available in the present . . . constrained by decisions already made and actions already taken—many before we were born."³

3. Sowell quoted in Virginia Postrel, *The Future and Its Enemies: The Growing Conflict Over Creativity, Enterprise, and Progress* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 48.