

# Review

---

BRIAN R. DIRCK

Joshua Claybourn, ed. *Abraham Lincoln's Wilderness Years: Collected Works of J. Edward Murr*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), viii, 285 pp.

Abraham Lincoln's early life constitutes a serious challenge for historians. Aside from his gangly personal appearance and bookish habits, he attracted no particular notice that might have caused his Kentucky or Indiana family and neighbors to record their impressions at the time; as a result, most of the extant primary sources date from later in Lincoln's life, either from Lincoln himself in brief autobiographies that offer only a few details about his youth, or from post-1865 reminiscences that were unavoidably colored by the passage of time and by Lincoln's fame. Still, historians harbor an ongoing fascination with Lincoln's early years—understandably so, given the deep public interest in all things Lincoln, and given that his rags-to-riches story naturally emphasizes his humble origins.

J. Edward Murr's own attraction to Lincoln's early life possessed a personal dimension. Born in 1868 not far from the site of the Lincoln farm in southern Indiana, he was trained in the ministry and served in a variety of Methodist churches throughout the state. He greatly admired Lincoln as an Indiana icon, and he believed that the Lincoln biographers of his time had both badly neglected and misunderstood Lincoln's Indiana years. This became something of an avocation for Murr, who by the time of his death in 1960 had published a series of articles on Lincoln's early years and written a book-length manuscript which he gave to DePauw University (his alma mater). *Abraham Lincoln's Wilderness Years* publishes selections of this manuscript for the first time, a three-part series Murr wrote for the *Indiana Magazine of History* in 1917–1918, and correspondence between Murr and historian Albert Beveridge.

Murr's writings were grounded in his interviews with people living in Indiana who had known Lincoln, and he believed this afforded him unique insights that were lacking in the popular Lincoln biographies of his day. This belief stood in large part due to the fact, Murr argues,

that William Herndon, Ida Tarbell, and those other biographers were outsiders, whereas Murr's status as a local citizen allowed Lincoln's Indiana's friends and neighbors to be more open and honest when speaking with him. "Often a scene was created when some down East Yankey [sic] breezed in and proceeded to obtain an interview," he wrote, whereupon "some of these old-timers would shut up like a clam" (p. 46). But they trusted Murr as a fellow Hoosier.

The special access Murr thus arrogated to himself drives the narrative of *Wilderness Years*. He toured the usual subjects of Lincoln's Hoosier life: his lineage, his labors on the family farm, his relations with his neighbors and kin, anecdotes regarding his sociability, honesty, and passion for education, and the circumstances surrounding the Lincoln family's move to Illinois in 1830. Murr provided vivid descriptions, gleaned from his many conversations and interviews, of familiar Lincoln incidents and character traits. He also offered an extensive foray into the background of Lincoln's mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, and a defense of Abraham's father Thomas, a man whom Murr described as "repeatedly slandered and censured" by Lincoln biographers, but who was largely undeserving of his poor reputation (20).

In some cases, Murr was straightforward regarding the source of a given anecdote. "We are indebted to Silas G. Pratt for an incident illustrative of Lincoln's mingled goodness, truthfulness, and honesty," he noted, prior to relating a tale regarding Lincoln and his stepsister Matilda Johnston (161). In other places, Murr was more opaque, ascribing his conclusions regarding a given Lincolnian story to his impressions rooted in conversations from multiple sources whom he does not specify.

Murr presented himself as the last word in the many debates surrounding longstanding Lincoln controversies, and as the Pratt description indicates, his overall take on Lincoln was almost uniformly laudatory. "Lincoln as a youth was remarkably free from bad or vicious habits," he asserted, and "he was in general good favor with all his associates and was dutiful and obedient to his father and mother" (170). Elsewhere he argued that Lincoln "reached the heights of fame from a lower level than any other great character in history" (133). His understanding of Lincoln was also grounded in sweeping generalizations and a rather quaint and largely outdated collection of frontier myths and stereotypes common at the time. In discussing Lincoln's superstitious nature, for example, Murr wrote that "the pioneer was more or less given to superstitious beliefs and committed to the trustworthiness of tokens . . . strange and weird beliefs [that] in particular

found a congenial, abiding place in the minds of pioneers who came from the South" (107).

Such matters aside, there is much to admire in this collection, containing as it does a plethora of telling anecdotes, many available in no other work. Murr truly does seem to have enjoyed special access to tales told by Lincoln's Indiana friends and family that they shared with few others. His work is also quite readable, an enjoyable (if at times somewhat disjointed) tour of Lincoln's life in Indiana.

Still, the narrative's hagiographic nature and the occasional lack of clarity regarding his sources will cause some to wonder just how valuable Murr's work might actually be. How trustworthy are Murr's stories? How closely did he question his sources concerning the veracity of their memories? How might the questions he posed for any given interviewee have biased the answers? These are legitimate concerns for any historian trying to make use of Murr's work as a primary source.

Nevertheless, Joshua Claybourn has done historians of Lincoln and Indiana an invaluable service by combining and publishing these materials, and doing so with an expert editorial hand, including useful footnotes and an excellent introduction explaining Murr's background and the circumstances surrounding his writing. If *Wilderness Years* poses questions about sourcing, hagiography, and the limits of reminiscences as primary sources, those questions are no different from those posed by other reminiscences of Lincoln's Indiana years, such as those contained in the Herndon-Weik collection. Historians using Murr's work will need to grapple with difficult problems surrounding his work, but those problems are endemic to any deep investigation of Lincoln's early life. Claybourn has done us all a tremendous service by bringing to light another option for primary sources related to the subject.

ANNOUNCING THE

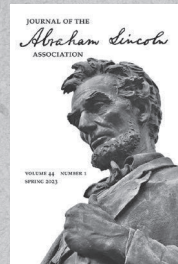
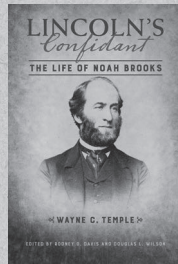
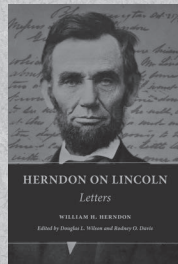
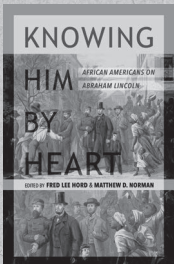
# UIS CENTER FOR LINCOLN STUDIES

S E R I E S

Publication of books about Lincoln and those who surrounded him remains important, as scholars continue to refine their understanding of Lincoln and his associates, and the educated public, too, continues its fascination with the sixteenth president. This series will in many ways take up the torch of The Knox College Lincoln Studies Center Series, which saw great success in publishing documentary editions. This series is interested in documentary editions, collections, and monographs. We welcome projects that are grounded in history, but also those that cross disciplinary boundaries throughout the humanities and social sciences. Interested authors should contact series editor Dr. Michael Burlingame ([mburl2@uis.edu](mailto:mburl2@uis.edu)) or acquiring editor Alison Syring ([asyring2@uillinois.edu](mailto:asyring2@uillinois.edu)).

## *Celebrating* LINCOLN STUDIES

at the **University of Illinois Press**



**UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS**