

Review

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Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*. Abridged and edited by Jonathan W. White. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023. Pp. 703.

Michael Burlingame is the most intrepid Lincoln researcher of our day. He has dug through manuscript collections, perused long-forgotten newspapers, and searched dusty corners for missing gems that greatly enhance our understanding of the sixteenth president and his times. He has edited a shelf of books filled with primary documents that will remain invaluable to writers and scholars. He stands above anyone in his mastery of the literature of Abraham Lincoln.

Burlingame turned that knowledge into his magnum opus, the monumental, two-volume, ten-pound, 2,000-page, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 2008 and affectionately known by Burlingame and his friends as the Green Monster, for the color of the first volume's cover. (Grateful scholars know that there is an even longer version online, the unedited manuscript, available through the good graces of the Lincoln Studies Center at Knox College.)

The set won widespread acclaim as perhaps the most thoroughly researched and meticulously documented biography of Lincoln ever published, making it essential reading for anyone who wanted to know the man. Its greatest strength was the plethora of quotes by Lincoln and the people around him. Their perceptions and phraseology put us about as close to Lincoln as it is possible to be. But however magnificent that work was, its literal heft inevitably placed it beyond the means of many general readers, who might not want to invest the time required to get through it.

Hence, the publisher enlisted Jonathan W. White, the author and editor of more than a dozen books about the Civil War era, to shorten the work. Still weighing in at a hefty 626 pages (plus 77 pages of footnotes and index), the abridgement runs roughly one-third its original length. White has done this strenuous job well, preserving a vast amount of detail and flavorful quotes while extensively shaving

and trimming. The footnotes have been cut, too, eliminating further insights and providing only the bare essential of sources.

Burlingame here provides the fundamentals of the life, from birth to death—with a heavy emphasis, understandably, on his Senate runs and presidency. About 30 percent of the work is devoted to Lincoln's first forty-six years, with 70 percent given over to his last ten. Burlingame is an unfailingly clear writer, though not a spellbinding storyteller along the lines of Carl Sandburg or Benjamin Thomas, past Lincoln biographers. In workmanlike fashion, he stacks up facts and lets Lincoln's life unfold as it did.

Anchored in the historical record, Burlingame offers thoughtful and well-reasoned opinions along the way. On the very first page, he deftly identifies the essence of Lincoln's character. "Born into emotional and economic poverty, Lincoln early on 'resolved to make the most of himself,' and he did so with [moral] precepts," Burlingame writes (p. 1). Lincoln understood that he could achieve a more fulfilling life by eschewing malice and treating others decently. While Lincoln kept organized religion at arm's length, those precepts were at the core of the great book he had access to from childhood on, the work that helped shape his understanding of human nature and his literary style, and that he later quoted to powerful effect—the Bible. In his mature years, Burlingame notes, Lincoln called the Bible "the richest source of pertinent quotations" and "the best gift God has given to man" (p. 23).

Unflinchingly examining the historic record, Burlingame makes no attempt to sugarcoat Lincoln's painful childhood, marred by cruelty and neglect. He examines Lincoln's rather hapless and, at times, mean-spirited father, noting that "the qualities that were to make Abraham Lincoln famous—his intellectual power, his ambition, his idealism, his eloquence, his spirituality, his integrity, his political wisdom, his judgment, his leadership—were lacking in Thomas" (p. 3). Burlingame delves into the illegitimacy of Lincoln's mother, Nancy Hanks, and cites reports that she was "loose" and "of low character" (p. 8). He touches on Lincoln's virtual abandonment, at nine, after his mother's death, when Thomas left his two minor children alone for months, to fend for themselves, as he sought a new wife. They wound up nearly naked and on the edge of starvation. Lincoln "feared being abandoned" for the rest of his life, Burlingame argues (p. 18). These early horrors left scars in the form of acute depression—including suicidal tendencies at times—and a peculiar emotional distance throughout adulthood, a reticence to reveal his heart to anyone. But it is possible, Burlingame argues—citing psychoanalytical theory—that Lincoln's

raging political ambition was grounded in a deep-seated inferiority complex.

Burlingame carefully charts Lincoln's slow rise in the world, which can be best described by advice Lincoln gave to an aspiring young lawyer years later: "Work, work, work is the main thing" (p. 51).

Doggedly hard work and a gift for friendship were means Lincoln used to win election to the state legislature, to become a lawyer, to marry, and to provide for a family. Burlingame links this personal growth to Lincoln's obsession with the idea that America should be a place where anyone, of any race or background, could rise on the strength of talent and effort. That nation's remarkable success, Lincoln thought, had its roots in the Declaration of Independence. During the last decade of his life, he argued tirelessly that the Union must remain true to its founding ideals, devoting the full measure of his willpower, courage, and political savvy to the nation's survival in its almost fatal struggle with slavery.

The importance of Lincoln's own words to the biography is evident throughout, including in the very chapter titles, which are quotes by Lincoln. Some of them are quite pungent, such as the heading for Chapter 7, "I Have Got the Preacher by the Balls." This is not a revisionist's Lincoln, though Burlingame includes details of some of the seamier moments of his life. The author plants Lincoln firmly in his place and time. He fairly evaluates him by the standards of his day, rather than judge him by ever-shifting modern perceptions of morality and justice untethered to practical reality or the political world Lincoln inhabited. While Burlingame does not shy away from the darker and more controversial sides of Lincoln, such as actions during the war that led him to be regarded by Southerners and Democrats as a cruel dictator, he provides context for these in the viciousness of war and the near disintegration of the Union.

Ideas that Burlingame fleshed out in recent books—notably *The Black Man's President: Abraham Lincoln, African Americans, and the Pursuit of Racial Equality* and *An American Marriage: The Untold Story of Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd*—appear throughout the work. Though it has been a popular sport in academic circles for decades to deem Lincoln a white supremacist, Burlingame places him squarely in his time. He reveals Lincoln to have been one of the most progressive men of his age in his interactions with African Americans, and one of humanity's greatest champions in taking pragmatic political actions that drove the nation toward the eradication of the curse of slavery. As for Mary Lincoln, Burlingame seems to harbor something of a grudge against her—which may be justified, given the extensive historical

record of her tantrums and impolitic resentments, her disturbing physical and verbal abuse of Lincoln, and her corruption that made his political struggles during the Civil War even more nightmarish. Burlingame spends little time rounding out this picture—at least, in this truncated volume—by exploring Mary’s lively intelligence and her role in pushing Lincoln to greatness. Nor does he dwell on the latter’s part in the struggles of the marriage, as an emotionally and often physically distant man lost in his inner world and ambitions.

Not surprisingly, in a book of this complexity, minor errors crop up. A cutline, carried over from the 2,000-page edition, gives the date of Matthew Brady’s famous portrait of Lincoln in New York and the Cooper Union speech as February 23, 1860. (Burlingame cited the correct date—February 27—in his unedited manuscript.) In Chapter 29, a subsection is headed “Emancipation Proclaimed” (p. 478). Three pages later, the next subsection bears the same title—evidently an oversight. Burlingame seems to place Hannibal Hamlin, later Lincoln’s vice president, at the 1860 Republican convention in Chicago, when he was in fact in Washington, D.C.

But quibbles about editing aside, this book is a monument both to Abraham Lincoln and to decades of hard work by Michael Burlingame. The picture Burlingame paints is nuanced, sensible, and authoritative. He helps us understand the resilience, political brilliance, steely will, and courage of the man who saved the Union in its darkest hour—a matter of no small interest to Americans during the political upheavals of 2024. Those who are fascinated by Lincoln, and want to learn from his life and struggles, owe it to themselves to read this one volume if they cannot traverse the vast expanse of the two.

We are fortunate indeed to be living in a time when Burlingame has dug through the archives and shared his findings with such fidelity and dedication. Work, work, work was the main thing for Burlingame, no less than for the great man he has brought to life.