

Review

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Brian McGinty. *Lincoln and California: The President, the War, and the Golden State*. Lincoln: Potomac Books, an Imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, 2023. Pp. 246.

After multiple books and articles on the man and the time, Brian McGinty has turned his attention to his own native state and its ties to Abraham Lincoln. The result, *Lincoln and California: The President, the War, and the Golden State*, is a valuable and rich addition to the literature on Lincoln and the Golden State. The last attempt to focus on this pairing, Milton H. Shutes's *Lincoln and California*, came out eighty years before McGinty's new work, which reflects a wealth of additional scholarship, and both newer and easier means of accessing it.

Combining McGinty's careful research and readable prose with a subject like Lincoln makes for a fine read, and, for some historians, perhaps a surprisingly important work. It should be unsurprising, given the many linkages that McGinty delineates. But, since Lincoln took great pleasure in telling stories that he found useful for making a point, here are a couple of anecdotes relevant to this review and, more crucially, this valuable book.

When casting about for a dissertation topic, I suggested to my doctoral adviser something generally related to "the Civil War and the Far West." He pondered and replied, "That is your third book." He explained that while he believed in the need to study the subject, few others seemed to agree, and would dismiss my work. Better to make your reputation first, he said, then write a book about it, and other historians would then consider it worthy of attention.

He was even more correct than he realized. Not long before, a western historian had met a leading Civil War historian who praised the scholar's work, then asked why they were "wasting their time" studying western history. The historian refrained from pointing out that the Civil War happened largely because the North and South wanted to export their society and economy to western states and territories.

In recent years, however, the "Civil War in the West" has come to mean not the battles in Tennessee or even the fight to keep Missouri in

the Union, but what Americans now generally consider the West: The area from the Rockies to the Pacific. In addition to works by Michael Magliari and Mark Stegmaier, among others, Leonard Richards has traced how the California Gold Rush affected the coming of the Civil War, and Glenna Matthews has examined California's response to the war, and the war's impact on the state. Thomas Cutrer's *Theater of a Separate War: The Civil War West of the Mississippi River, 1861–1865* focuses on military activities well beyond the traditional trans-Mississippi theater. For Megan Kate Nelson's *The Three-Cornered War: The Union, the Confederacy, and Native Peoples in the Fight for the West* to have been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in History suggests how seriously historians finally are taking this topic.

How much Lincoln had to do with the West may have seemed less clear, given that he was born in a border slave state that almost joined the Confederacy and married into one of its older families. Although Andrew Jackson rose to prominence on the Tennessee frontier, Lincoln was the first truly western president. Indeed, every ten years, the U.S. Census determines not only the nation's population, but its geographic center, and no president before Lincoln had spent his entire pre-presidential life west of that line. Increasingly, historians are noticing: Richard W. Etulain, a distinguished historian of the western past and western literature, has produced three volumes on Lincoln and the West, with more to come.

But the Far West was another matter. Lincoln never went near the Pacific Coast, but on the final day of his life, he told three people (Mary Lincoln, Speaker of the House Schuyler Colfax, who was soon to travel there, and Cornelius Cole, a Republican congressman from California) of his desire to see California after his presidency. Why did California matter so much to Lincoln, and how much did Lincoln matter to California? McGinty set out to address this. Thanks to his diligent research and highly readable prose, *Lincoln and California* makes the answers clearer. After opposing the Mexican-American War, "Lincoln was willing to accept California as one of the states, to pay close attention to it when he was president, and to eagerly make use of the many and important strengths it brought to the nation as the Civil War was being fought: vast quantities of gold and silver that helped finance the Union war effort, and volunteer troops and professional soldiers who helped keep the secessionist slave power from capturing the state," McGinty writes. "So, at the end of the terrible conflict, California emerged dramatically as a symbol of the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness that Lincoln cherished and sought to preserve" (xiv).

One connection between Lincoln and California was legislative. Historians such as Leonard Curry and Heather Cox Richardson have pointed to the significance of the activist Thirty-Seventh Congress in passing the Homestead Act, the Morrill Land-Grant College Act, and the Pacific Railroad Act. Granting their importance to those who lived and profited east of the Mississippi, they mattered greatly to those west of the Mississippi. These measures reflected not only the Republican Party's whiggish antecedents, but also how it saw the nation's future in the West. What sometimes seems lost in discussions of these acts is that Lincoln supported and signed them. As McGinty reminds us, all three had particular significance to California: The Homestead Act for new settlers, the Morrill Act for laying the groundwork for the University of California in Berkeley, and the Pacific Railroad Act for the obvious ties to the Central Pacific, the "Big Four" behind its construction, and their long-term effects on the state and the region.

That same Congress approved the first income tax and use of paper money or greenbacks, and California wound up at the heart of that debate. Its gold helped finance the Union war effort, but its citizens also hotly debated whether paper was its equivalent. McGinty notes that no California banks would issue the notes, and the state continued to require payments in gold. Unsurprisingly, legal cases ensued, with no real outcome: Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase disagreed with the state, but California judges upheld their use, and the state's distance probably enabled it to get away with actions that states closer to Washington, D.C., might not have tried. Surprisingly, McGinty neglects to mention the resulting irony: After becoming chief justice, Chase led the Supreme Court in declaring paper money unconstitutional. McGinty also notes Ulysses Grant's links to California, but not that Congress then authorized him to appoint two new justices to expand the court to nine, and that they joined in overturning Chase's decision.

That story highlights two other areas in which McGinty shines: the ties between California and both the judiciary and the men who fought the war. Befitting the author of *Lincoln and the Court* and *The Body of John Merryman: Abraham Lincoln and the Suspension of Habeas Corpus*, McGinty pays careful attention to California's judges, especially Stephen J. Field, the state's leading jurist. Eventually, Lincoln named Field to the Supreme Court. Field went on to a 34-year career on the high court that included rulings that promoted substantive due process and protected corporations. One benefit to the court at the time of his appointment was Field's expertise in mining law. McGinty also explains how land and mining issues affected California in its

early statehood, and how they involved forces from afar, including Lincoln.

The military represented another connection between Lincoln, California, and the nation. McGinty refrains from overdoing how much California mattered to the fighting of the war—no official battles were fought there—but shows how several leading figures—most notably Ulysses S. Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman, and Henry W. Halleck—had links to California that shaped the state, themselves, or both. McGinty also delves into the military leaders in California during the war, and military actions against Native Americans that contributed to what some scholars have called a genocide. “The fate experienced by the state’s native peoples during Lincoln’s presidency was dark and depressing,” McGinty notes, adding that had been the case before Lincoln and remained so afterward (p. 113). He ultimately concluded that Lincoln knew too little about the problem, and neglected to consider how much the war and the nation’s expansion affected Indigenous People’s lives.

At the heart of any understanding of Lincoln is politics, and McGinty addresses this subject in several ways. One is through a careful, thorough discussion of Lincoln’s long relationship with Edward Baker, who had set out for California after becoming close enough to the Lincolns for them to name their second child for him. McGinty outlines how influential Baker became on the West Coast, as a Californian and then as a senator from Oregon who continued to wield power to the south. Although Baker barely appears in the finest study of Lincoln’s friendships, McGinty makes clear his belief in the closeness between the two men, noting Lincoln’s description of him as “my dearest personal friend,” and perhaps signaling to Lincoln scholars that Baker deserves more attention (p. 79).

McGinty’s source for this story is an account by Noah Brooks, who joined Baker as part of a long list of Lincoln allies from or involved in California. Brooks dispatched 258 “Letters from Washington” to the *Sacramento Union*, “tying Lincoln to California, and ultimately helping historians learn more than they would otherwise have known about the president and the western state” (p. 164). Other Californians claimed friendship with Lincoln, mainly from earlier connections in Illinois, or at least that they supported him. One of them was Leland Stanford, elected governor a few months after Lincoln took office. “Stanford favored the preservation of the Union, without question, but whether he favored it for constitutional reasons or because he wanted the federal government to support the construction of a trans-continental railroad connecting California to the rest of the country

was not very clear," although McGinty notes the obvious importance of Stanford's role with the Central Pacific—and how strongly he ultimately supported the Union (p. 47).

Another valuable part of this book is a chapter on "What Was Remembered." McGinty assesses how California recalled and memorialized Lincoln at the time of his death and later, and thereby offers a vivid reminder of the ways in which Lincoln became part of people's lives even when they lived far from him or long after him. Lincoln's name and views helped inspire the challengers to Stanford's successors in railroad operations, politics, and corruption early in the twentieth century: They called themselves the "Lincoln-Roosevelt Republican League," aligning themselves as well with President Theodore Roosevelt. McGinty shows that a later progressive Republican from California, Earl Warren, greatly admired Lincoln, and worked to assure that causes that the president served would have proper judicial support. He examines everything from the Lincoln Highway and the Lincoln Shrine in Redlands to recent debates in San Francisco over whether Lincoln's name should remain on a school (it did) and his statue should continue to stand at City Hall (it did).

A good book should leave the reader wanting more, and even a good book can leave out certain subjects worthy of discussion. McGinty certainly makes ample use of newspaper sources, and gives Noah Brooks his due, but how the press covered Lincoln might have deserved further consideration: Ambrose Burnside's decision to shut down the *Chicago Times* is well known to a lot of Lincoln scholars, but the arrest of the *Los Angeles Star's* editor may have been at least as interesting. McGinty traces Lincoln's election in 1860 but has little to say about California during his reelection campaign in 1864, and how the state's voting differed. Stanford appears, but not the rest of the Central Pacific Big Four, and Lincoln's support for the railroad had a long-term impact not only on that troika of railroad magnates (Mark Hopkins, Collis Huntington, and Charles Crocker were the others), but also on California and the rest of the West as they exerted political and economic influence for decades to come.

But these are minor cavils in light of a major achievement. Four score and seven years after J. G. Randall asked, "Has the Lincoln theme been exhausted," and showed otherwise, McGinty has provided by far the best account we have of Lincoln's relationship with California, how important they were to each other, and thus how important California was to Lincoln's efforts to preserve and reshape the Union. Sadly, thanks to John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln never fulfilled his wish to see the Golden State.