Review Essay

Getting Right with Lincoln versus Getting Lincoln Right

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John McKee Barr. *Loathing Lincoln: An American Tradition from the Civil War to the Present.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014. Pp. 484.

Joshua Zeitz. *Lincoln's Boys: John Hay, John Nicolay, and the War for Lincoln's Image.* New York: Viking, 2014. Pp. 390.

Civil War history is not only a vessel of knowledge; it is a source of national identity, of who we are as Americans—which is why debates over the war's purpose are often so heated. Historians concerned largely with equality and social justice find the war's primary significance in its effect on the treatment of African Americans. Their work widens the recent *emancipationist* aspect of Civil War scholarship.[1] Historians concerned mainly with national unity define the Civil War's significance in the thwarting of secession and restoration of regional harmony. They broaden the older *Unionist* standpoint.[2] Joshua Zeitz's *Lincoln's Boys* and John Barr's *Loathing Lincoln*, the two books under review, extend and clarify the war's emancipationist aspect.

Lincoln's Boys is a beautifully written book that denounces the "romance of reconciliation" whereby former enemies settled their differences. "Writing against the rising current of Southern apologia and popular vogue for reunion and reconciliation," John Nicolay and John Hay pioneered the northern interpretation of the Civil War, which had been caused by "an uprising of the national conscience against a secular wrong that could never be blotted away by the romance of reunion" (7). The war's primary cause, in Zeitz's view, was collective remorse over slavery, not secession and the formation of a new Confederate state. More notable than Zeitz's unusual theory of the

1. See, for example, David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2001).

2. The most recent exemplar of this tradition is Gary Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

war's cause is his disappointment with one of American history's most important episodes—the repairing of a possibly long-term national rupture—because it took place at the expense of racial justice. John Nicolay and John Hay, Abraham Lincoln's boys, were part of the minority holding this opinion.

In the first quarter of his book, Zeitz follows Nicolay and Hay through their early years and through the events leading to the 1860 election. Like most Republicans, they were antislavery but racist by today's standards. Their bent of mind during the first half of the war arguably followed that of Lincoln's, who confidently delegated to them a wide range of duties: writing and answering letters; interviewing and meeting with officials and constituents; taking minutes during cabinet meetings; going on presidential missions, including visits to military officers in the field; keeping track of the presidential budget—almost all to be represented in their great biography.

The politically astute but reserved Nicolay and the youthful, gregarious, and brilliant Hay worked together with little friction, and both esteemed their chief. By the last half of 1863, however, their esteem deepened to profound affection. Whether historical events sparked this feeling is unknown. The word "revere," however, is worth emphasizing, for it is the word Zeitz uses to depict not only how Lincoln's boys felt about their president; it also suggests how their feelings drove the oft-noted antisouthern and anti-Democratic bias evident throughout their ten volumes.

Not until Zeitz gets to the last third of his book does he identify the contestants to whom his subtitle, *The War for Lincoln's Image*, alludes. After Lincoln died, his secretaries gathered up eighteen thousand documents from the White House and shipped them to a Springfield bank, where they were sealed. Meanwhile, Josiah Holland, Henry Raymond, Francis Carpenter, and Isaac Arnold wrote books of praise for the late president. Before starting his own biography, William Herndon gave public lectures, including a revelation of Lincoln's miserable marriage, resulting partly from his wife's shrewish disposition and partly from his inability to get over the death of the love of his life, Ann Rutledge. Herndon based his claims about Lincoln's prepresidential years on interviews and written correspondence with hundreds of people who had known Lincoln in New Salem and elsewhere. Short on money, Herndon sold some of his notes to Ward Hill Lamon, whose ghostwriter organized them into a book revealing Lincoln's moral, religious, educational, and other shortcomings, including a capacious inventory of dirty jokes, coarse personal habits, shrewdness, and raw ambition. Lamon's *The Life of Abraham Lincoln; From His Birth to His*

Inauguration as President was meant to celebrate his humanity, but it provoked such outrage that the book's publisher canceled a proposed second volume. Then, in 1888, Herndon collected more information about his former law partner and, finding himself unqualified for sustained literary labor, employed the assistance of Jesse Weik, a Knox College graduate, to assemble into a narrative the raw materials that would have otherwise remained unpublished. The resulting *Abraham Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life* turned out to be three volumes on Lincoln's prepresidential "humanity," that is, his coarseness and vulgarity, which the public declined to read.

Zeitz then turns to the production of Nicolay and Hay's *Abraham Lincoln: A History.* After serving in diplomatic positions to which Lincoln appointed them after his reelection, Nicolay and Hay returned to the United States, eventually to become marshall of the Supreme Court and secretary of state, respectively. They had long planned a history of Lincoln and the war, but not until 1875 did Robert Todd Lincoln honor their request for his father's presidential papers. Neither secretary took his generosity for granted. They invited him to censor and revise the drafts they sent him. He did so. The authors themselves were concerned to censor delicate information. After interviewing men who had worked with Lincoln, they realized they had more negative information than they wanted, and they handled the problem simply by ceasing to search for informants. Doing so prevented lies about Lincoln from getting into print. In all probability, these lies consisted of unflattering testimony.

Nicolay and Hay competed against not only Lamon and Herndon but also a brace of southern hard-liners, including the throng of Lincoln haters inventoried in John Barr's *Loathing Lincoln.* Northern and southern hotheads, however, misrepresented their regions. After Reconstruction, men and women everywhere favored reconciliation, and this mutuality expressed itself in many forms. "At battlefield reunions, in popular fiction, inscribed on war memorials, a single theme reverberated clearly: the war was over, its cause was moot, and all should be honored." Zeitz declares such sentiment as "wistful but selective retrospection" (266).

Richard Gilder, editor of *Century* magazine, never thought of reconciliation as "selective but wistful retrospection." Because Gilder's handling of Nicolay and Hay embodied the national mood of his day, Zeitz's account of their relation is pivotal. Under Gilder's editorship, *Century* magazine had become one of the nation's leading vehicles for regional reconciliation. *Century*'s Civil War battle tales and romances between children of former enemies were so successful that Gilder

claimed they unveiled all hearts and "did more to bring together North and South than anything that had happened since they were torn apart in 1861" (270).

Keen on publishing both a serialized and a book version of Nicolay and Hay's presidential history, *Century* offered them an unprecedented sum. Gilder was exhilarated after the secretaries signed the contract, and he defined their mission: "to unite the North and South as never before, around the story and experience of the great President" (271). However, Nicolay and Hay sought moral sway, not reconciliation, and they wrote in a tone that repelled Gilder. He called a meeting to warn the secretaries that *Century*'s generous payments did not allow for unbridled denunciation of the Confederacy. Gilder was overly sensitive. His two authors were certainly given to bias and sarcasm, as is evident throughout their volumes, but they were also concerned to set down all the facts before ridiculing some of them.[3] From what Zeitz tells us, one would never know it. For example, he accurately records Hay's portraying General Thomas ("Stonewall") Jackson as "a slow, dull, unprepossessing youth" but ignores the remainder of Hay's sentence: he was an "unprepossessing youth of great correctness of conduct and untiring in his studies." Jackson, Hay continues, was a "fanatical Sabbatarian," but Zeitz passes over Hay's point: it was precisely Jackson's piety that endeared him to his men. Zeitz's Jackson is buffoonlike, but Hay's overall impression differs: "all these [idiosyncratic] qualities combined to make him the first of the subordinate Southern leaders, a soldier incomparable for any employment where energy, celerity, and audacity were desired."[4]

Zeitz never tries to assess Nicolay and Hay's rendition of any person or event. He does note, without comment, frequent criticism of the authors' bias against southerners and Democrats, and he does define Nicolay and Hay's work as an "unofficial Northern, Republican Party interpretation of the Civil War." On this score Zeitz cannot be challenged, but some parts of his book raise questions about his own bias.

In chapter 16, "We Are Lincoln Men All Through" (hardly a label for objective observers), Nicolay and Hay assert that, even if Abraham Lincoln's and Jefferson Davis's upbringings were reversed, Lincoln could never have been a supporter of slavery (285). Whether Zeitz

3. Nicolay and Hay, to take one example, refer to John Gilmore and John Jacquess, who risked their lives to determine whether President Jefferson Davis was open to peace negotiation, as "fanatics," and deemed the very yearning for peace in August 1864 as an "unreasonable and abnormal craving." *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (New York: Century, 1890), 1:217.

4. *Ibid.*, 393, 305, 400.

agrees with this asociological claim is uncertain. It makes sense only if one credits the secretaries' belief that Lincoln's worldview was formed by his family bloodline and providence—unchanging things that make one wonder how Lincoln could have changed his mind about anything (285). The variability of Lincoln's twentieth-century *image* is another matter.

Two clusters of Lincoln biographies appeared after Nicolay and Hay published their ten volumes. Ida Tarbell's and Carl Sandburg's works, overlapping in time with the critical and slanderous biographies of Albert Beveridge and Edgar Lee Masters, respectively, formed the first set of writings. Zeitz neglects to mention Godfrey Lord Charnwood, Nathaniel Stephenson, and the Reverend William Barton—all relevant to the issue of Nicolay and Hay's influence in the battle for Lincoln's image. The second set of writings arose from the academy: James G. Randall, T. Harry Williams, Avery Craven, Richard N. Current, and Benjamin Thomas. This last group, which should include Reinhardt Luthin, was labeled "revisionist" because its members were more inclined than their amateur predecessors to consider the Civil War a result of northern and southern hotheads eager to get at one another.

Many historians today criticize their professional forebears for assigning insufficient weight to slavery as a cause of war. Zeitz himself is one of these critics. "These revisionist strains in Civil War historiography," he says, "cannot be understood outside the context of Jim Crow culture and politics" (312). Zeitz never asks whether they can be *validated* outside this context. One realizes that a fight for Union alone offends the moral sensibilities of many, but Lincoln's passion to reunite the hearts of his northern and southern compatriots was fervent. Thus, when Nicolay portrayed Lincoln's presidency as a "great act of emancipation that raised his administration to the plane of a great historical landmark, and crowned his title of President with that of Liberator," he was probably speaking more for himself than for Lincoln (322). Although Nicolay and Hay's ten volumes informed all subsequent Lincoln scholarship, Zeitz overestimates their effect on its direction and conclusions.

John Nicolay and John Hay's *Abraham Lincoln: A History* is a prominent part of the pro-Lincoln biographical and historical tradition. The anti-Lincoln tradition, according to John Barr, occupies a minority status but imparts strong inspiration: it is illiberal and reactionary in its aim to limit the effects of Lincoln's liberty-expanding achievements, including emancipation. Barr's *Loathing Lincoln* is a critical review and dissection that contributes significantly to emancipationist scholarship.

Barr begins with Lincoln's 1858 campaign against Stephen Douglas and concludes with Lincoln's assassination, to which most southerners reacted joyfully. Next, Barr reiterates his conception of the Civil War's achievement: improved prospects of a biracial society. Growing northern indifference to racial justice and the end of Reconstruction limited these prospects. Even biographers of different political stripes gave less attention to race issues. Ward Hill Lamon was an antiabolitionist and southern sympathizer while William Herndon was an ardent abolitionist, but slavery played a secondary role in their biographies. Not only did their subject—Lincoln's prepresidential years—minimize slavery's relevance; it brought out Lincoln's human side, with which all could identify. But northern readers interpreted such leveling as an insult to Lincoln's memory, while southern readers found in it proof of the barbaric man they had always thought Lincoln to be: "the low-bred infidel of Pigeon Creek, in whose eyes the Savior of this world was 'an Illegitimate child,' and the Holy Mother as base as his own" (88–89). The "Vulgarian" president was also an immoral president: ruthless, cruel, insensitive to human suffering, unprincipled in his lust for imperial power, and criminal in his waging war against civilians (90).

In his account of the Lost Cause era and the maturation of the industrial revolution (1890—1918), Barr lays out the network of authors, speakers, magazines, historical societies, textbooks, and commemorative occasions condemning Lincoln. He also reveals the emerging strand of black criticism, which found fault with Lincoln's reluctance to emancipate on moral rather than pragmatic grounds. The new white attacks on Lincoln included the old but transcended them. In particular, the Spanish-American War and its outcome furnished a lens through which Lincoln's detractors could see his imperialist impulses more clearly.

Barr mentions but fails to emphasize the 1909 centennial celebration of Lincoln's birth—the point at which Lincoln's renown surged, surpassing George Washington's for the first time. Progressive Era reforms, which excluded racial justice, seemed predicated on what Lincoln had said, done, or implied. The twentieth century became Lincoln's century, and his new place in the American mind challenged the new generation of his haters. Now they had to work harder and differently to reveal the malignancy beneath his benign appearance.

To make matters worse for Lincoln loathers, a growing number of Lincoln worshipers were *southerners* bent on reconciliation. As early as 1893, a reader of the newly published *Confederate Veteran* expressed a widely shared view: "the names of Davis and Lincoln . . . will be

the common heritage of the American people . . . and the very terms North and South will be forgotten in a mingled admiration of the . . . Anglo American race" (119). As this sentiment became part of the nationalistic wave preceding and following World War I, the loathers faced a two-front conflict: to cultivate Lincoln hatred, on the one hand, and to fight "Lincolnolatry" on the other.

The religious awakening of the 1920s and early 1930s, Barr shows, intensified the anti-Lincoln tradition. Church magazines conveyed information on Lincoln's religious vices, strengthening the connection between his atheism and his indifference to liberty. The loathers' tone was always cranky, often vile, and the interwar period (1918–41) contained many examples, including Mildred L. Rutherford and Lyon G. Tyler, but no one in Barr's gallery was more vicious than Edgar Lee Masters. Named after Robert E. Lee, Masters hated Alexander Hamilton, worshipped Stephen Douglas, and held an almost religious detestation of Lincoln that dominates his book. In Carl Sandburg's words, Masters's *Lincoln: The Man* is a "long sustained Copperhead hymn of hate."[5]

As the Depression wound down, the hymn's volume swelled; but Lincoln worship, always a context for Lincoln loathing, peaked during World War II and leveled off during the Cold War. By the late 1960s, it had fallen significantly while Lincoln's critics assumed a fresh analytic tone.

Many leftist scholars, including Richard Hofstadter, believed Lincoln failed to do enough for emancipation. Many on the right believed he did too much, and their voices were loudest. The new generation of Lincoln critics—Russell Kirk, Frank Meyer, Murray Rothbard, Willmoore Kendall, E. M. Bradford, Edmund Wilson, Thomas Fleming, and others—faced off against Harry Jaffa and his many neoconservative allies. This section of *Loathing Lincoln* is among Barr's strongest. Southerners continued to churn out anti-Lincoln declarations, but conservative intellectual concerns became extreme and superimposed themselves on regional and racial interests. Bradford, a ferocious neo-Confederate, defined equality as a heresy, conceived Lincoln as Adolf Hitler's forebear, and considered the Constitution an embodiment of southern libertarian ideals. Philosophical attacks on Lincoln turned on the perpetual tension between liberty and equality, on what the Declaration of Independence means, and whether its relation to the

5. Cited in Matthew D. Norman, "An Illinois Iconoclast: Edgar Lee Matthews and the Anti-Lincoln Tradition," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 24 (Summer 2003), 44.

Constitution is organic, as so many liberal historians enthusiastically insisted. In the framers' minds, liberty trumped equality. In the liberal mind, equality was prior to liberty—a contention made urgent by the late twentieth century's civil rights movements. The Declaration of Independence, with its ringing pronouncement that "all men are created equal," replaced the Constitution as the leading symbol of America's civil religion. Lincoln embraced this symbol, his admirers said, but critics saw him twist it as he pressed equality to the service of his quest for power and fame.

The final chapter concerns developments at the fin de siècle: 1989–2012. The presidencies of George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama helped define the political climate; multiculturalism, the politics of identity and recognition, and what Pierre Nora calls the "revenge of the underdog," reflected in a surge of writings about slavery, defined the intellectual climate.[6] Lerone Bennett's *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* was prominent among many African American assaults on Lincoln. Lincoln, in Bennett's view, personified the essence, not the transcendence, of racism. At length, Thomas DiLorenzo became one of the leading Lincoln critics. To many, the less evidence he presented to receptive readers, the stronger his argument seemed. President Lincoln, he revealed, deliberately sought to transform the structure of American society by making wartime centralization and suspension of individual rights a permanent arrangement that later morphed into a welfare state. Thomas Fleming, Lew Rockwell, Ron Paul, Patrick Buchanan, Clyde Wilson, and Thomas Woods elaborated these themes, and their views crystallized in conservative think tanks, books, and such periodicals as *Chronicles* and *Southern Partisan*. Insinuated into this phase of the anti-Lincoln movement was more than a slight touch of racism and anti-Semitism, which Barr mentions without elaboration. Fleming was the most rabid exemplar, but anarcho-capitalist and anti-Zionist Murray Rothbard, a cofounder of the ultraconservative Ludwig von Mises Institute and an admirer of nineteenth-century anti-Lincoln anarchist Lysander Spooner, was one of the most influential of this generation of Lincoln detractors (72–75).

The recent voices of Lincoln indictment were thus similar to the old and still articulated through political philosophy, but they were shriller than before. Conservative intellectuals of the forty years

6. Pierre Nora, "Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory," *Eurozine*, April 19, 2002, www.eurozine.com.

following World War II were replaced by the intellectual gorillas of the next decade and a half.

Joshua Zeitz and John Barr have produced two original and valuable books. Their work, however, must be assessed, for to establish the *biases* of Lincoln's admirers and detractors is not necessarily to deny the reasonableness of their praises and complaints. The central question, set down at the start of this review, is how their assessments inform the emancipationist conception of the Civil War's conduct and consequences.

First, consider the widely held belief that slaves were better off than both contemporary white laborers in the North and their own children after emancipation. Zeitz and Barr see no need to counter this frequently ridiculed claim. Yet, the *average* slave, precisely because he was valued as capital equipment and compelled to labor and live as his or her owners dictated, was better fed, better cared for when sick, and better supported in infancy and even old age than the *average* white Southerner. Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's Bancroft Prize–winning *Time on the Cross* and Robert Fogel's *Without Consent or Contract* detail the evidence.[7] Because they show slavery to have been more paternalistic, less brutal, than many historians would prefer to see it, Fogel and Engerman's massive body of information now constitutes forbidden knowledge. Neither Zeitz nor Barr mention it in their work.

Barr nicely captures but does not pursue accusations of Lincoln's cruel, even criminal prosecution of the war. In truth, neither Lincoln nor Davis waged direct war on civilians. Even William Sherman's march, contrary to southern opinion, was a war on infrastructure, not civilians. His orders to commanders were explicit on this matter; they permitted foraging a specified portion of farmers' crops and animals but no destruction of their homesteads. However, imagine Lee's foraging not only en route to Gettysburg but also through half the state of Pennsylvania. Suppose most of the battlegrounds were in Northern states. Imagine Philadelphia and New York reduced to rubble, as were Vicksburg, Charleston, and other southern cities. Would northern citizens not have judged Davis's actions to be criminal? Imagine, too, that Davis had a navy large enough to blockade all major northern ports, just as Lincoln actually did in the South. Assume that the same cargo failed to reach shore: not only military equipment but also clothing,

7. Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974); Robert Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989).

food, shoes, and medical supplies for civilians. Deprived of these necessities, would northerners have felt about Davis the way southerners felt about Lincoln?

Another complaint by Barr and, to a lesser extent, Zeitz concerned southerners' exaggeration of Lincoln's centralized government, which they believed he designed to abridge the rights of the states. That southerners condemned President Davis for the same reason, however, underscores the necessity of centralization in war. But Lincoln may have gone farther than necessary. After all, he delayed the convocation of Congress for twelve weeks after Fort Sumter fell. During this time, he ignored constitutional provisions at will. He assembled militias, enlarged the army and navy beyond their authorized number, called out volunteers for three years service, spent public money without congressional appropriation, suspended habeas corpus, arrested people suspected of being involved in disloyal practices, and imposed a blockade on southern ports. He knew Congress could negate his actions but would never do so after the fighting began. Even when Congress was in session, however, he continued to act without consulting it. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. greatly admired Lincoln but named him one of the forerunners of "the Imperial Presidency."[8]

That intellectuals who deplored Lincoln were sometimes right in their criticism is not only evident in the matter of centralization. To the present day, they object to Lincoln's transforming the Declaration of Independence from a list of grievances against the British king and a justification for separation into a celebration of racial equality. That all men are created equal referred in 1776 to the equality of all Englishmen, including colonists, to equal representation in London. It remained for historian Pauline Meier to dismiss Lincoln's interpretation of the Declaration's reference to equality as mistaken and "wishful thinking," for the phrase "all men are created equal" was warped in the early nineteenth century by many groups, including political parties, to reinforce their own interests.[9] Not only is Meier's research, like Fogel and Engerman's, ignored by our authors; they are also silent on work which refutes their claim that Lincoln at Gettysburg announced that emancipation justified the lives lost in war.[10]

8. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 58–73.

9. Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 154–208. See especially 201–6.

10. Gallagher, *Union War*, 82–87.

The final problem these books raise concerns reconciliation. The Lincoln portrayals that contributed to reconciliation between North and South, Zeitz writes, undermined the situation of the people Lincoln helped to emancipate. This is an extraordinary statement. One of the most significant events in American history, the reunion of two regions once at each other's throat, is looked on as a historical and moral stain. Barr expresses himself in identical terms. African American rights and freedoms, he declared, were sacrificed on the altar of white Christian nationalism and reunion. But at the beginning of the twentieth century, African Americans were already doomed. Notwithstanding the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, white citizens knew that black Americans had no guarantee of equal protection, human dignity, or voting rights. Because African Americans were socially ostracized *within* both North and South, reunion and nationalism would have been celebrated no matter why the Civil War was fought, while the continuation of regional hostility would have done nothing to promote racial harmony. No aspect of the emancipationist perspective is more puzzling than its stipulation that racial justice and regional harmony were mutually exclusive choices. There were no choices. Reconciliation was the only possibility, and the gathering threat of a world war made it imperative.

Criticism sometimes means a book is not worth reading; sometimes criticism is a measure of a book's vitality and provocation. *Lincoln's Boys* and *Loathing Lincoln* are two vital and provocative must-reads. The general reader as well as academics will find Zeitz's biography a profitable page-turner. The academic reader will admire Barr's erudition and analyses, and he or she will find his work the best account by far of the anti-Lincoln tradition.