

Review: Lincoln Inside Out

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LINCOLN INSIDE OUT

Walter Johnson

Michael Burlingame. *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994. xxii + 380 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95.

Lincoln. A litany of questions unfold from the familiar name: questions about his first loves and depressions, about the quality of his marriage and the sanity of his wife, about his ambition and the source of the commitment required to lead his nation through a war which took the lives of more than 600,000 men. Michael Burlingame has taken up these questions and a few more along the way in *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*. Burlingame has given us a Lincoln who loved children but was uncomfortable with women, a Lincoln sometimes angry and often melancholy, an unhappy husband who took refuge in politics, a party hack transformed at mid-life, and a committed opponent of slavery who grounded his views in the rough experience of his own childhood. Burlingame's book is a "psychobiography." It adds to a cluster of like-labeled biographies within the Lincoln literature, and to the depth of our knowledge about the man who stood at the center of the remaking of the republic.¹

Part of the problem with Lincoln is that we know him too well to know him at all. The dead President's apotheosis has washed back over the railsplitter's development; lies and legend, fact and fiction seem promiscuously mixed in the Lincoln of popular memory.² Of particular importance in this regard are the materials collected by William Herndon, Lincoln's long-time law partner. In the years after the Civil War, Herndon interviewed and corresponded with hundreds of Lincoln's friends and associates, recording their impressions of the man and their memories of his stories, jokes, and actions.³ Burlingame professes no certainty in making "extensive" use of these sources (which many before him have avoided) but he has faced their difficulties with an open nose: a developed sense of what "smells authentically Lincolnian" (pp. xxiv-xxv). Smell, of course, is a tricky sense, and some of Burlingame's sources have the delicious aroma of nostalgia, while others seem to lose the track of the elusive inner Lincoln in the pervasive odor of cultural commonplace. Still, there are good stories aplenty here, novel interpretations of some well-known events, and a useful reminder that there

is a plane of historical meaning that is masked by narratives of public events and analyses of clashing sociological abstractions.

Burlingame begins with the outer reaches of Abraham Lincoln's political career. In 1849, when he returned to Illinois after his single term in the House of Representatives, Burlingame's Lincoln considered himself a failure. But over the next five years Lincoln grew up. Drawing from Carl Jung and the psychologist Daniel J. Levinson, Burlingame describes Lincoln's "desolate years" as a time of individuation and integration: Lincoln reflected upon his past weaknesses and developed "atrophied" areas of his psyche; he became a mentor to younger men and accepted his own mortality; he set aside the judgment of others to follow his inner voice; he left behind party politics and became a statesman. Some historians have maintained that Lincoln's presidency followed naturally from his early politics, but, by Burlingame's reading of the sources, the transformation from party hack to American statesman was evident at the time: many who met Lincoln in those years later described his evident grandeur and intensity.

Of the atrophied functions Lincoln developed in these years, none was more important than the "feminine" feeling function, particularly as it related to political values. And among those values none was more important than what Burlingame describes as a longstanding "hatred" of slavery. The end of slavery, not the preservation of the Union, was the meaning of Lincoln's Civil War, Burlingame argues, here departing from, among others, Charles B. Strozier's *Lincoln's Quest for Union: Public and Private Meanings* (1982), which emphasized Lincoln's unhappy home life as the governing metaphor of his sectional politics. To support his case Burlingame provides numerous examples, dating to at least the 1830s, of Lincoln's criticism of slavery and adds the insight that slavery as characterized by Lincoln was less often the brutality of the sadist or the family separations of the slave trade than it was easy gain from the hard work of others, sustenance that Lincoln said was paid for with "the sweat of *other men's faces*" (p. 32).

Acknowledging the colonizationist white supremacy evident in the debates with Douglas, Burlingame focuses on the source rather than the extent of Lincoln's opposition to racial tyranny. At the bottom of Lincoln's views on slavery, Burlingame finds Thomas Lincoln. Lincoln's father threw away his son's books, beat him, and rented him out to the neighbors; Lincoln responded by secretly satirizing those he worked for, killing his father's dog, and skipping the elder Lincoln's funeral. "I used to be a slave," an acquaintance remembered Abraham Lincoln saying (p. 36). The memory of those years, Burlingame argues, guided the President who went to war with the South and issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

Father Thomas and Father Abraham tangle through the next two chapters of *The Inner World*. With the exception of his eldest son, Robert, Lincoln

indulged his sons (and any stray children he met on the street) in a way that was obvious and sometimes embarrassing to those around him. Robert, Burlingame argues, was prudish and superior, more a Todd than a Lincoln. But Lincoln's affection for his younger boys was marked by the "emotional indulgence and kindness so conspicuously absent in his own childhood home" (p. 68). As his younger sons died, first Eddie then Willie, Lincoln's grief and his own frustrated longing for a father's affection were expressed in his uncritical acceptance of his youngest son, Tad, a troubled, spoiled child who was probably darling only at a distance.

The image known to the public was, Burlingame argues, the product of Lincoln's difficult mid-life transition. The man into whom Lincoln grew was a Jungian archetype, the Old Man. A combination Wise Elder and Great Father, the Old Man was reflected in Lincoln's relations with a variety of surrogate children: young lawyers, politicians, and assistants to whom he was an affectionate mentor; the enlisted men of the Union, by whom he was termed "Father Abraham"; a succession of sternly rebuked commanders of the Army of the Potomac; and the slaves he emancipated during the war. Noting the frequency with which contemporaries (and subsequent observers) recurred to the language of fatherhood when they described Lincoln, Burlingame's reading of the sources leads him to conclude that Lincoln's inner transformation "radiated" into a collective recognition.

Old Man or not, Lincoln was a melancholy man, and Burlingame takes up the topic of depression in the next chapter. The most remarkable incident occurred in 1841, a breakdown that left his close friend Joshua Speed fearing that Lincoln would take his own life. Burlingame attributes the apparent breakdown to Lincoln's decision to end his engagement to Mary Todd in favor of Matilda Edwards, who loved him not. Early losses, especially the death of his mother when he was nine, Burlingame argues, lay behind Lincoln's melancholy and left him particularly vulnerable to feelings of abandonment. The chapter marks a significant departure from Strozier's *Quest for Union*, which emphasizes Lincoln's feelings of responsibility for his mother's early death as the long-term cause of his depression, and the departure and marriage of Joshua Speed, with whom Lincoln had long shared bed and board, as the proximate cause of the 1841 breakdown.

Lincoln, Burlingame goes on to argue in the next chapter, "did not like women," and the death of the young boy's mother figured prominently in the grown man's attitude (p. 123). The argument is amply illustrated with a variety of brief and belittling responses made to female petitioners during the Civil War and a few stories of Lincoln's painful prairie courtships. Lincoln in love, Burlingame argues, was deeply ambivalent about commitment and strangely passive in the face of intimacy. He was, to all appearances, afraid of being abandoned again.

The chapter on "Lincoln's Anger and Cruelty" is the longest in *The Inner World*, which is in itself remarkable for a biography of a man often remembered for his detached amiability. The beginning of the chapter is devoted to well-turned insults delivered to legal and political opponents, to fools and hustlers, to bullies, bores, botherers, and office seekers. And, Burlingame notes, nothing incensed the abandonment-fearing Lincoln so much as political turncoats.

The bulk of the chapter is devoted to Lincoln's years in the White House, and the President's anger at spies and over-sharp suppliers, his frustration with the hamfisted prosecution of the war, and, especially, his conflicts with the Radical Republicans. In the case of the last, Burlingame seems to me to misstep. Arguing that Lincoln shared the "strong antislavery" and vigorous bellicosity of the Radicals, Burlingame attributes conflict within the Republican party to questions of "style" rather than "ideology" (p. 173). Burlingame means that Lincoln found his abolitionist opponents arrogant and over-righteous, and they returned the favor by thinking him always underqualified and often overconfident. Their disagreements, however, mapped a field of important practical differences: differences about the justification and extent of emancipation, about holding the border states and readmitting the seceding ones, and about the treatment of former Confederates and former slaves. These men, as LaWanda Cox has pointed out in her *Lincoln and Black Freedom: A Study in Presidential Leadership* (1981), were arguing about a future they were figuring out piece by piece, responding to concrete problems posed by the prosecution of the war and the demanding presence of slaves and contrabands. They were fighting about where to lay the line that would distinguish freedom from slavery.

Ambition and abandonment intertwine through the final two chapters of *The Inner World*, the first about Lincoln's political career, the second about his marriage. Burlingame leaves little doubt that Lincoln was an ambitious politician. And, in contrast to George Forgie's *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and his Age* (1979), in which ambition and destructive sectional rivalry play out a generational struggle with the Founding Fathers, Burlingame's account is rooted in the specific circumstances of Lincoln's life. In the early days Lincoln's ambition was selfish: he was willing to injure others to insure his own success. After the mid-life transition, principle became the guide of Lincoln's ambition. But always that ambition was rooted in the bitter loneliness of Lincoln's childhood, the "emotional malnutrition" that left Lincoln hungry for the approval of others (p. 257). Still, Burlingame suspects, even Lincoln would not have aspired to the presidency had he not married Mary Todd.

The Lincolns' marriage, in Burlingame's view, was exceedingly unhappy. By emphasizing marital discord, Burlingame departs from recent revisions of

William Herndon's unsympathetic portraiture of Mary Todd Lincoln. Ruth Painter Randall's *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography of a Marriage* (1953) and Jean Baker's *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (1987) paint the marriage in brighter hues, emphasizing the affection (and, for Baker, shared ambition) which held the couple together through the deaths of two children, a tumultuous political career, and the Civil War. There is little affection for Mary Todd Lincoln in this book. At home in Springfield, Burlingame's Lincoln was tyrannized by his wife, scolded, yelled at, and, one time, beaten with a big stick—an incident highlighted on the back jacket of *The Inner World*. In return he spent as much time as possible away from home, riding the court circuit and campaigning for office. Lincoln in the White House was subject to his wife's jealousy of the women he met socially, her embarrassing outbursts and meddling in government appointments, and her lavish spending on baubles and busty dresses, which suffused the tightly strapped government with a scent of corruption.

Mary Todd Lincoln's adult behavior, Burlingame argues, was, like her husband's, shaped by the early death of her mother: Mary Todd was a woman abandoned as a child, hungry for attention, and angry at the father who had distanced himself by quickly remarrying. In Jungian terms, she was an Eternal Child, tied to her Old Man by a relationship that was less mutual affection than it was paternal surrogacy—paternal surrogacy and shared ambition, argues Burlingame. For as much as she was a "shrew" who practiced Lincoln in the art of dealing with difficult people and drove him out of his own house and into the White House, Mary Todd Lincoln was also ambitious herself, a goad to the candidate's own occasionally wavering ambition. "The Lincolns' marriage," Burlingame concludes, "was a fountain of misery, yet from it flowed incalculable good for the nation" (p. 326).

There, but for an epilogue which briefly and clearly contrasts Burlingame's Lincoln to those of previous psychobiographers, ends *The Inner World*. If there is a larger problem with Burlingame's book, it is in the overstrict definition of what exactly constituted *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*. After all, a childhood of abuse and abandonment was not Lincoln's alone. Such childhoods were commonplace in the early nineteenth century, as commonplace as the indulgence of small children was among middle-class families like the Lincolns by mid-century. As Lincoln grew up, the culture around him changed, and different choices were available to him as a middle-class man in the bustling Springfield of the 1850s than had been available to his settler father on the frontier of the early Republic. To put a finer point on it: the terms—fatherhood and slavery and abandoned obligation—that Burlingame takes to be transparent descriptions of the inner Lincoln had concrete, intertwining meanings in a nation going through a convulsive transformation. They were the idiom nineteenth-century Americans used to talk and argue about their society and the changes that were overtaking it, about political

power, family life, and religious revival, about slavery and the market revolution, about the dissolution of old ways and the displacement of existing hierarchies. Which is to say nothing more than that the inner world of Abraham Lincoln, the world experienced by the president and described by his observers, was suffused with the language and politics of the outer world he did so much to change.

Walter Johnson teaches History at New York University. His book about the slave market in New Orleans will be published by Harvard University Press.

1. Other psychobiographies are L. Pierce Clark, *Lincoln; a Psychobiography* (1933); George B. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and his Age* (1979); Charles B. Strozier, *Lincoln's Quest for Union: Public and Private Meanings* (1982); Dwight G. Anderson, *Abraham Lincoln: The Quest for Immortality* (1982). Jean Baker's *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (1987) takes up many of the same issues as Burlingame.

2. Notable Lincolns include Paul M. Angle, ed., *Herndon's Life of Lincoln: The History and Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln as Originally Written by William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik* (1942); Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868); John George Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (1890); Ida Tarbell, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1900); Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* (1926) and *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* (1939); Benjamin Platt Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* (1952); Don Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850s* (1962); Stephen Oates, *With Malice Toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1977); Gore Vidal, *Lincoln: A Novel* (1984); Mark E. Neely, *The Last Best Hope of Earth: Abraham Lincoln and the Promise of America* (1993); Phillip Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* (1994), and Daniel Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (1995). On the Lincoln of popular memory, see Scott Sandge, "A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory," *Journal of American History* (June 1993); and Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (1994). I am grateful to Phillip M. Katz for a helpful push through the Lincoln literature.

3. For a sampling, see Emanuel Hartz, ed., *The Hidden Lincoln: From the Letters and Papers in William Herndon* (1938).