



Winter 2012

Book Review: Lincoln and His Books

Allen C. Guelzo
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cwfac>

 Part of the [Intellectual History Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Guelzo, Allen C. "Lincoln and His Books." Book Review of Reading with Lincoln by Robert Bray. *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 33.1 (Winter 2012), 75-84.

This is the publisher's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cwfac/29>

This open access review is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Book Review: Lincoln and His Books

Abstract

“I have found no one to speak of Lincoln as a man of either capacity or patriotism,” smirked Confederate general Lafayette McLaws, as the Army of Northern Virginia prepared to march into Pennsylvania on June 28, 1863. His was not, unhappily, an opinion limited to Abraham Lincoln’s enemies-in-arms. Henry Clay Whitney admitted that, at best, Lincoln “had the appearance of a rough intelligent farmer.” Elihu Washburne agreed: meeting Lincoln on the railroad platform in Washington, D.C., on February 23, 1861, Washburne could not help thinking that Lincoln “looked more like a well-to-do farmer from one of the back towns of Jo Davies’s county than the President of the United States.” His own soldiers had some difficulty taking seriously a man who presented such “an odd figure on a horse, and the odder for wearing a stovepipe hat that increased his height and angularity.” The more educated the observer, the lower the opinion seemed to be. A Pennsylvania College student who listened to Lincoln deliver the Gettysburg Address was, forty years later, still put off by the way Lincoln appeared on the platform, “with his arms hanging at his side at full length and holding a slip of paper with both hands on which was written his three minute address, which had been prepared, according to report then current, on his way from Washington.” Newspaper editors foamed angrily over Lincoln’s election, asking, “Who will write this ignorant man’s state papers?” And the intolerably well-educated George Bancroft burst out, in a letter to his wife, “We suffer for want of an organising mind at the head of the government. We have a president without brains.” [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Abraham Lincoln, Civil War, president, intellect

Disciplines

History | Intellectual History | Political History | United States History

Review Essay

Lincoln and His Books

ALLEN C. GUELZO

Robert Bray. *Reading with Lincoln*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010. Pp. 271.

"I have found no one to speak of Lincoln as a man of either capacity or patriotism," smirked Confederate general Lafayette McLaws, as the Army of Northern Virginia prepared to march into Pennsylvania on June 28, 1863. His was not, unhappily, an opinion limited to Abraham Lincoln's enemies-in-arms. Henry Clay Whitney admitted that, at best, Lincoln "had the appearance of a rough intelligent farmer." Elihu Washburne agreed: meeting Lincoln on the railroad platform in Washington, D.C., on February 23, 1861, Washburne could not help thinking that Lincoln "looked more like a well-to-do farmer from one of the back towns of Jo Davies's county than the President of the United States." His own soldiers had some difficulty taking seriously a man who presented such "an odd figure on a horse, and the odder for wearing a stovepipe hat that increased his height and angularity." The more educated the observer, the lower the opinion seemed to be. A Pennsylvania College student who listened to Lincoln deliver the Gettysburg Address was, forty years later, still put off by the way Lincoln appeared on the platform, "with his arms hanging at his side at full length and holding a slip of paper with both hands on which was written his three minute address, which had been prepared, according to report then current, on his way from Washington." Newspaper editors foamed angrily over Lincoln's election, asking, "Who will write this ignorant man's state papers?" And the intolerably well-educated George Bancroft burst out, in a letter to his wife, "We suffer for want of an organising mind at the head of the government. We have a president without brains."¹

1. McLaws to Emily McLaws, June 28, 1863, *A Soldier's General: The Civil War Letters of Major General Lafayette McLaws*, ed. John C. Oeffinger (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 194; Whitney, *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews and Statements About Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 648; Washburne, William C. Harris, *Lincoln's Rise to the Presidency* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 318; Abner R. Small,

They were, of course, wrong. Lincoln had what John Todd Stuart called a “mind of a metaphysical and philosophical order . . . of very general and varied knowledge.” He was “always studying into the nature of things,” Stuart told James Quay Howard in 1860 and William Henry Herndon in 1866. Lincoln “read hard works—was philosophical—logical—mathematical—never read generally” and managed to make himself “an Educated Man in 1860—more than is generally known.”² That so few people guessed this on first impression stemmed partly from Lincoln’s lifelong exercise in self-teaching—the response of a hungry intellect in search of fodder—partly from his strategy of upending opponents and critics by luring them into underestimating him, and partly from his temperamental reluctance to reveal much about his past for fear that it would be used as a club against him. But for those willing to make it their business, it did not take long for Lincoln’s literary, scientific, legal, and philosophical interests to be discovered. John Hay was rocked backwards, as only an Ivy Leaguer would be, by the discovery in mid-1863 that Lincoln had “a little indulged inclination” for philology. The journalist (and fellow of King’s College, Cambridge) George Tuthill Borrett called at the Soldiers’ Home in 1864 and sat down with Lincoln to a discussion of “England, and its political aspect and constitution; and thence he went off, unasked, into a forcibly drawn sketch of the constitution of the United States, and the material points of difference between the governments of the two countries,” after which Lincoln “launched off into some shrewd remarks about the legal systems of the two countries, and then talked of the landed tenures of England.” But what astounded Borrett most of all was to have walked in the door and found Lincoln “deep in Pope.”³ “He seemed to be a great admirer of Pope, especially of his *Essay on Man*, going so far as to say that he thought it contained all the religious

The Road to Richmond: Civil War Memoirs of Major Abner R. Small of the Sixteenth Maine Volunteers, ed. H. A. Small (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1939), 51; Rev. M. Colver, “Reminiscences of the Battle of Gettysburg,” 1902 *Spectrum* [Gettysburg College Yearbook, Special Collections], 179–80; Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln’s Gettysburg Declaration: “A New Birth of Freedom”* (Fort Wayne: Lincoln National Life Foundation, 1964), 48; Mark DeWolfe Howe, *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), 2:132.

2. Stuart, *Herndon’s Informants*, 519, and *The Lincoln Papers*, ed. David C. Mearns (New York: Doubleday, 1948), 1:159.

3. Hay, diary entry for July 25, 1863, *Inside Lincoln’s White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay*, ed. Michael Burlingame & J. R. T. Ettliger (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 67–68; Borrett, *Letters from Canada and the United States* (London: J. E. Adlard, 1865), 252.

instruction which it was necessary for a man to know. Then he mused for a moment or two, and asked us if we could show him any finer lines than those ending, as he quoted them without hesitation—All nature is but art, unknown to thee; / All chance, direction, which thou canst not see; / All discord, harmony not understood; / All partial evil, universal good: / And, spite of pride, in erring treason's spite, / One truth is clear, whatever is, is right."

Nobody has devoted more attention to tracing out the roots of Lincoln's intellectual curiosity, especially in literature, than Robert Bray, the R. Forrest Colwell Professor of American Literature at Illinois Wesleyan University. Bray has not only written for this journal what amounts to a periodic table of Lincoln's reading, but also has written a biography of Lincoln's tempestuous opponent for Congress, Peter Cartwright.⁴ *Reading with Lincoln* is, in effect, a large-scale commentary on his "chart" of Lincoln's reading. It begins with the preceptors and grammar texts Lincoln encountered during his all-too-brief passage through "blab schools" in Kentucky and southern Indiana—Lindley Murray's popular *English Reader* (1799), the *Kentucky Preceptor* (1812), *The American Speaker* (1811), Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres* (1793), and the urtext of American rhetoric in the early republic, Caleb Bingham's *The Columbian Orator* (which ignited another aggressively self-taught genius, Frederick Douglass). No one living with the schools we live with today can understand how these books could possibly have served the purpose of teaching the juvenile population what are now deemed the great goals of educational life—how to play together harmoniously in the same sandbox, appreciate diversity, and cultivate global citizenship. But this is, I suppose, because Lincoln's educators were interested less in promoting global harmony than in establishing models for civic virtue in democratic practice. Blair and Bingham had no interest in whether their charges were being educated for competition with world economic powers; they thought it was more important that their young readers should be free republican citizens. Handing them anthologies that inculcated rhetoric (the stuff of democratic persuasion), virtue (because democracies were held together by the virtues of their citizens, not as monarchies were, by power and patronage), and tales of Revolutionary-era glory (free from any suggestion that the Founders were blemished by the defects of self-interest, slaveholding, and contempt for the rabble) was the way to do it. Today, we would no more think of distributing "Parson" Weems's *Life of Washington* to our AP history classes than we

4. "What Abraham Lincoln Read: An Annotated and Evaluative Bibliography," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 28 (Summer 2007): 28–81.

would recommend *Snow White* as a serious study of social interactions among dwarves. But Weems not only taught Lincoln to glorify “all the accounts there given of the battle fields and struggles for the liberties of the country,” but to see in the Revolution something more than merely a struggle for “National Independence,” something “that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come.” And it was Weems who made him “exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made.”⁵ I am not sure that there could have been a greater pedagogical triumph than this.

Once he started reading, Lincoln never stopped; even in the last few weeks of his life, he told Noah Brooks that he was particularly looking “to get at” that monument of Calvinist theology, “Edwards on the Will.”⁶ Along the way, Bray finds Lincoln picking up Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (and links the *Decline*’s “language, tone and sense” to the brooding anxieties of Lincoln’s Lyceum speech) along with the volatile religious skepticism of Constantin-François Volney’s *The Ruins; or, Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires* (1791), Voltaire’s *Important Study of the Holy Scriptures* (translated in English in 1819), and Tom Paine’s *Age of Reason* (1793–94). The latter, Bray believes, is “the most likely source for “Lincoln’s skepticism concerning the Bible’s inspiration” (73), and it leads by a direct line to Lincoln’s own earliest writing, the “little book on Infidelity,” which Lincoln’s friends destroyed in manuscript before its publication could destroy his political prospects.

But even more than Enlightenment unbelief, the young-adult Lincoln adored poetry—read it, memorized it, even tried to write it. What Bray finds curious is the selectivity of Lincoln’s tastes in poetry—Burns and not Blake, Byron and not Wordsworth, Gray and not Coleridge, Pope and not Keats, Shelley, or Tennyson. Considered strictly in terms of poetry, Burns was the young Lincoln’s hands-down favorite (Isaac N. Arnold believed that Lincoln had somewhere written a lecture “upon Burns,” like that on “Discoveries and Inventions,” which was “full of favorite quotations and sound criticisms,” and Milton Hay remembered that Lincoln would recite Burns with a “Scotch accent” that allowed

5. Lincoln, “Address to the New Jersey Senate at Trenton, New Jersey, February 26, 1861, Roy P. Basler et al., eds. *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), 4:236.

6. Brooks, “Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln,” *Lincoln Observed: Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks*, ed. Michael Burlingame (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 219.

him to “render Burns perfectly”).⁷ And little wonder; Burns, like Lincoln, was the product of—and a rebel against—Calvinist theology, a self-tutored genius, and a son of the soil who believed passionately in democratic equality. “Then let us pray that come it may / (as come it will for a’ that) / That Sense and Worth, o’er a’ the earth / Shall bear the green an’ a’ that / For a’ that an’ a’ that / It’s coming yet for a’ that / That man to man, the world o’er / Shall brithers be for a’ that.”

It was the young Lincoln’s religious unbelief that probably attracted him to the poetry of Byron, and that same skepticism linked him to a number of otherwise unrelated poets—Longfellow (the only Longfellow poem Lincoln admired was also Longfellow’s most religiously skeptical poem, “The Birds of Killingworth”), Poe, Thomas Hood, and Walt Whitman (although Bray remains rightly skeptical that Lincoln ever became a devotee of *Leaves of Grass* in the way Daniel Mark Epstein has rendered him).⁸

Looming over all other literary figures in Lincoln’s mind was William Shakespeare. This is not quite so remarkable as Bray is tempted to claim, since no playwright dominated the American stage in the nineteenth century as thoroughly as Shakespeare, prompting James Fenimore Cooper to designate him “the great author of America.” Daniel Webster was a great quoter of Shakespeare and did not mind stopping full-tilt in his reply to Robert Hayne to correct Hayne’s misuse of the “honest ghost” of Banquo. Nor has Lincoln’s fondness for Shakespeare ever been quite the secret his love for Burns, Byron, Voltaire, and Paine has been. He told James Hackett, the English Shakespearian (in the midst of inviting Hackett to come by the White House to talk theatrical shop), that although there were some of “Shakespeare’s plays I have never read,” there were “others I have gone over perhaps as frequently as any unprofessional reader. Among the latter are Lear, Richard Third, Henry Eighth, Hamlet, and especially Macbeth. I think nothing equals Macbeth.” Hackett, in turn, embarrassed himself by allowing Lincoln’s comments to be leaked to the newspapers (where Lincoln was promptly roasted for preferring Claudius’s soliloquy “O, my offense is rank” to Hamlet’s more famous “To be or not to be”), for which he humbly apologized. If there had ever been anything unknown about Lincoln’s Shakespearian fascinations, it was soon dissipated by Hackett’s inept revelation. And of course, studies of

7. Arnold, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg, 1885), 444; Hay, “Recollection of Lincoln: Three Letters of Intimate Friends,” *Bulletin of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 25 (December 1931): 7.

8. Epstein, *Lincoln and Whitman: Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington* (New York: Ballantine, 2005), 15.

Lincoln's use of Shakespeare have long been a staple of the Lincoln literature.⁹

It may be simply the instinct of a professor of literature, but Bray tends to understand Lincoln as a reader who discovered interesting intellectual problems through his reading, rather than a man who discovered problems and then turned to reading to find understanding of them. He is never quite able to sort out whether Lincoln was using literature or vice versa, and one result of that uncertainty is that Bray dwells long on the literary, which offered adornment and confirmation to Lincoln's thinking, and short on the philosophical and political, which really were causative. (I don't think it's an accident that the Shakespeare plays Lincoln told Hackett he loved best were all *political* plays). Of the five chapters that make up *Reading with Lincoln*, four of them are about the literary works Lincoln read; only one devotes any attention to Lincoln's philosophical reading.

Even within that chapter, Bray occasionally wrong-foots Lincoln's sources. For instance: he wants to lay Lincoln's "fatalism" at the foot of David Hume rather than John Calvin, Jeremy Bentham, J. S. Mill, or even Thomas Lincoln. Unhappily, he does so on the strength of a single throwaway comment in a letter written by Herndon in 1870 and reprinted in Ward Hill Lamon's unfinished *Life* ("Mr. Lincoln moved to this city in 1837, and here became acquainted with various men of his own way of thinking. At that time they called themselves free-thinkers, or free-thinking men. I remember all these things distinctly; for I was with them, heard them, and was one of them. Mr. Lincoln here found other works,—Hume, Gibbon, and others,—and drank them in: he made no secret of his views, no concealment of his religion. He boldly avowed himself an infidel.")¹⁰ But Hume makes no other appearance in Herndon's writings, or in the interviews and letters about Lincoln he collected from 1865 until his death. By con-

9. Bruce A. McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820–1870* (Ames: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 34; "Speech of Daniel Webster, of Massachusetts, January 26 and 27, 1830," *Webster-Hayne Debate on the Nature of the Union: Selected Documents*, ed. Herman Belz (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), 85–86; Irving H. Bartlett, *Daniel Webster* (New York: Norton, 1978), 282–83. See also R. Gerald McMurtry, "Lincoln Knew Shakespeare," *Indiana Magazine of History* 31 (December 1935): 265–87; Robert Berkelman, "Lincoln's Interest in Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 2 (October 1951): 303–12, David C. Mearns, "'Act Well Your Part': Being the Story of Mr. Lincoln and the Theater," *Largely Lincoln* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961), 114–49, and James A. Stevenson, "A Providential Theology: Shakespeare's Influence on Lincoln's Second Inaugural," *Midwest Quarterly* 43 (Autumn 2001): 11–28.

10. Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln: From His Birth to His Inauguration as President* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1872), 494.

trast, Bray asserts that “Lincoln is not known to have read Bentham and seems only to have dabbled in Mill.” Yet, there is more of Bentham and Mill in Lincoln than we can find of Hume. From Mill, he borrowed his most famous description of what made a society free; from Jeremy Bentham, the most radical and free-thinking of British liberals, he not only borrowed the standard utilitarian maxim of “the greatest good for the greatest number” but also Bentham’s concept of legal punishment as rehabilitation rather than retribution and the Benthamite axiom that all human choices are a function of selfishness and self-interest. The similarity is striking, as shown below.

What is more astonishing in *Reading with Lincoln*—although this again may be a measure of the distance between a professor of literature and a historian of ideas—is the short shrift given Lincoln’s reading in law (six pages, on Blackstone) and in political economy (three pages), despite Herndon’s insistence that Lincoln “liked political economy, the study of it,” and Shelby Cullom’s admiration for Lincoln’s mastery of the subject (“Theoretically . . . on political economy he was great”).¹¹ Lincoln actually did enough reading on political economy

<p>To begin as hired labourers, then after a few years to work on their own account, and finally employ others, is the normal condition of labourers in a new country . . . like America or Australia.</p> <p>J. S. Mill, “On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes,” in <i>Principles of Political Economy, with Some of Their Application to Social Philosophy</i>, vol. 3 of <i>Collected Works of John Stuart Mill</i> (London: Routledge, 2008), 766–7.</p>	<p>Twenty-five years ago, I was a hired laborer. The hired laborer of yesterday, labors on his own account to day; and will hire others to labor for him to-morrow. Advancement—improvement in condition—is the order of things in a society of equals.</p> <p>Lincoln, “Address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin,” September 30, 1859, <i>Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln</i>, 3:479.</p>
<p>. . . from first to last. Without any one exception, the end in view is the greatest happiness of the greatest number.</p> <p>Jeremy Bentham, <i>The Constitutional Code</i>, vol. 9, <i>Works of Jeremy Bentham</i> (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1843), 2.</p>	<p>I will simply say, that I am for those means which will give the greatest good to the greatest number.</p> <p>Lincoln, “Speech to Germans at Cincinnati, Ohio,” February 12, 1861, <i>Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln</i>, 4:202.</p>

11. Herndon to Jesse Weik, January 1, 1886, *The Hidden Lincoln, From the Letters and Papers of William H. Herndon*, ed. Emmanuel Hertz (New York: Viking, 1938), 117; Cullom, Walter B. Stevens, *A Reporter’s Lincoln*, ed. Michael Burlingame (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 154.

that Herndon afterwards was able to itemize Lincoln's favorite texts: Mill, Carey (although without specifying whether this was Henry Carey of *The Harmony of Interests* or Matthew Carey of the *Essays on Political Economy*), John Ramsey McCullough, and above all, Francis Wayland's *Elements of Political Economy* (1837). Bray acknowledges that Wayland exerted over Lincoln "a mastery so complete as to make the work in question his own" (162). But that is very nearly the extent of his commentary on Wayland, while Mill and Carey get barely a nod, and McCullough—who edited David Ricardo's writings, sat with James Mill in the Political Economy Club, and served as the first professor of political economy in that cauldron of Benthamite theory, University College, London—disappears completely.

Most astonishing of all in *Reading with Lincoln* is the near-disappearance of the Bible and religious texts. Bray's most extended treatment of Lincoln's use of the Bible actually occupies only a five-page niche at the opening of his chapter on Shakespeare, something that seems peculiar in a study of a politician who was zinged by his opponents for citing Scripture to political purposes and a president whose Second Inaugural Address takes his hearers further into the mystery of God's will than all the other American presidents combined. Even within that small span, Bray devotes an outsize amount of attention not to Lincoln, but to C. E. Macartney's 1949 opus, *Lincoln and the Bible*—all of it unusually bristling. He faults Macartney's book for being "marred by the illogic of its Christian apologetic" and his "conventional Methodist way" (190), and elsewhere he denounces James Smith, the Scots Presbyterian who served as the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, as the author of a "white elephant of a book" (153), and in general leaves the impression of quite another buzz saw at work than literary analysis.¹² Bray is convinced that even the mature Lincoln used the Bible only "for his public utterances, while Shakespeare typically served as the final existential statement of how he, as a private person, saw the human condition" (189). This is perilously close to suggesting that Lincoln offered up chunks of the Bible without any real conviction and to suit the temper of his public, something that sits a little oddly beside the increasingly personal nature of Lincoln's theological musings during the Civil War in the "Meditation on the Divine Will," the letters to Eliza Gurney, and the remarks he put into

12. Oddly, Bray fuddles the name—it was Clarence Edward Macartney (not Charles) who wrote *Lincoln and the Bible*. Nor was he a Methodist. Macartney was the pastor of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and also quite a gifted amateur historian who wrote a biography of George B. McClellan in 1940, as well as *Lincoln and His Generals* (1926), *Lincoln and His Cabinet* (1931), and *Grant and His Generals* (1953).

the hands of Albert Hodges in 1864. It was not Shakespeare, he told Noah Brooks, but “that strength which is promised when mortal help faileth” and the confidence that “no thought or intent of his escaped the observation of that Judge by whose final decree he expected to stand or fall in this world and the next” that provided existential prodding in his life. Much as “Lincoln cared but little for tenets or sects,” said Joseph Gillespie, he “had strong & pervading ideas of the infinite power wisdom & goodness of Deity and of mans [sic] obligations to his Maker and to his fellow beings.”¹³

But Bray’s inattention to religious texts becomes an interpretive problem, too, and not just a methodological one. Lincoln’s preference for the king over the prince in *Hamlet* involved more than amateur critical appreciation. “To be or not to be” is not Hamlet’s meditation on the futility of life but the unwillingness of its victims to end it by their own hands; “O, my offense is rank” is Claudius’s tormented diagram of the theological and ethical problem of free will: “O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven; / It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t, / A brother’s murder. Pray can I not, / Though inclination be as sharp as will. / My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent, / And like a man to double business bound / I stand in pause where I shall first begin, / And both neglect.” (*Hamlet*, act 3, scene 3) And this is the point at which the wheels of Bray’s chariot begin to come off. Bray proposes “a few tentative observations” (212) about the importance of Claudius’s monologue for Lincoln—the burden created by guilt, the horror of parricide—both of which have been attributed to Lincoln from time to time by George Forgie, Charles Strozier, and Edmund Wilson. But the plainer and more obvious answer is that Lincoln remained through his entire life under the cloud of predestination, which formed the worldview of his Calvinist parents and the Old School Presbyterian congregations he infrequently allowed himself to be associated with, and he could not escape a sense of fascination in watching Claudius writhe in predestination’s coils, too. Lincoln was very nearly at his frankest when he repeatedly told people he was a fatalist, and there is no reason why we should refuse to see religion, however attenuated it had become in Lincoln’s life, as the context from which Lincoln embraced Claudius’s complaint as his own. “Mr. Lincoln told me once that he could not avoid believing in predestination,” Gillespie recalled, and anyone who hoped to find guidance from Jonathan Edwards on free will could not have been

13. Brooks, *Lincoln Observed*, 209–10; Gillespie to Herndon, December 8, 1866, *Herndon’s Informants*, 508.

wholly untouched by the forbidding logic of Calvinist theology. As Alfred Kazin once wrote, "No president before Lincoln had thought it imperative to discuss a divisive social issue in a religious context, and with such passion and tribulation." Lincoln may not have been sure whether God existed, but he *was* sure that if he did, he was the God of Calvinism.¹⁴

When Bray is good, he is very good, and not only very good but eloquent. And certainly *Reading with Lincoln* must move at once onto the list of must-reads in the Lincoln literature. Its one flaw appears whenever its author fears that literature might have to share its favors with religion or philosophy or political economy—or philology—and thus rises up and makes off with Lincoln like the distraught father fleeing the Erlkönig. Always, in any effort to measure the impact of someone's reading on someone's life, there is the temptation to connect dots that actually have no connection, or to reduce the relationship of reader and reading to one's favorite mechanism, or to promote our own favorite texts or genre as our subject's favorites texts or genre. How we read is never simple or direct. But Bray's *Reading with Lincoln* is, even with the imbalances I've so petulantly faulted, still the most comprehensive and stimulating map of Lincoln's world of print we have on offer. How Lincoln used that map, or whether it used him, is still a very open question.

14. Gillespie, *Herndon's Informants*, 506; Gillespie, *The Lincoln Memorial: Album-Immortelles*, ed. Osborn H. Oldroyd (New York: G.W. Carleton, 1882), 457; Kazin, *God and the American Writer* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 134.